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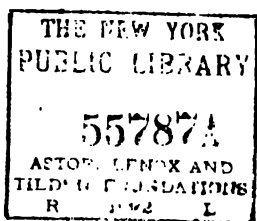
THE CLUE OF THE PRIMROSE PETAL

BY
HARVEY WICKHAM



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THE CLUE OF THE PRIMROSE PETAL

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING THE GARDEN OF EDEN

AS the taxi turned from the last narrow street of the village and struck the broad asphalt of a lordly country road, Ferris McClue took a letter from his pocket, and—pausing now and then to skip the unimportant parts—began to read it aloud.

“‘Obtain entrance to Ivy Towers—make thorough investigation of conditions. When ready to report, insert in one of the New York morning papers an advertisement pretending to offer for sale a second-hand motion-picture projecting outfit.’ What do you think of that?”

The other occupant of the cab—a trim young lady in a dark blue tailor-made suit—shook her head. McClue continued:

“‘I leave it to your own professional judgment how you are to secure admittance to the Towers and in what capacity you are to appear. The only stipulation is that you go in

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person and obtain a footing which will enable you to get into close touch with the inhabitants. There is no necessity for you to know my name, and I hope the enclosed cashier's check will be sufficient to compensate you for your natural curiosity in that regard.' The impudent pup! 'Your report will be called for at your office by a third person as soon as I hear from you in the manner indicated, when you may expect a supplementary fee.'

"There! That's all—excepting some directions for reaching the place, and a typewritten signature, 'Yours truly, Anxious.' You really must tell me what you think of it, Miss Hope."

The lady in the blue suit smiled. This was the third time she had listened to the substance of this preposterous letter since they left the city. So this was Ferris McClue, the man whom the newspapers had nicknamed "The Ferret!" But neither reporters, police officials nor the general public ever saw anything but his results, or were permitted to hear of him save as something cold, silent, inscrutable. No man is a hero to his valet, and it is only natural that no detective should be an unreal, miraculous cunning, creepy sort of person to his chief assistant. There was a trace of superiority in Clara Hope's smile—though superiority was beginning to be a little doubtful of itself.

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“I do not pretend always to understand him,” she had recently confided to her journal. “He acts very often like a mere boy, excitable and excessively enthusiastic. Much of his success looks like luck. But I now realize that there is more to him than I at first imagined, and that he is doing extremely well for an independent operator of only thirty-five, handicapped with a nervous temperament and an unmethodical education. I only hope that I am not becoming romantic, and that my present mode of life is not undermining my character. I must admit that I am falling into his habit of using slang and semi-grammatical expressions, and that there is something in the world of late which fills me with a curious thrill, as if all the oxygen in the atmosphere had been turned to ozone.”

Two years before the date of this entry, she had been—if not more admirable, certainly more firm, and for one thing quite incapable of keeping a journal at all. Clara was a school-teacher then, living in a world bounded by discipline, correct English, arithmetic and elementary geography. She had looked down upon all detectives with what she afterwards discovered to be a not altogether well-informed contempt, regarding them as hardly respectable, and interesting only to the readers of cheap, paper-bound

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volumes—to youths, in short, who would not scruple to smuggle their favorite fiction into the very school room.

McClue often declared that it was the careless perusal of one of these confiscated masterpieces which led to her professional undoing and “woke her up.” But he was mistaken. It was a healthy desire for bread and butter which did the trick. Teaching in a small town position that calls for a good address and presentable raiment—on sixteen dollars a week—is likely to have an awakening tendency upon anybody in time. And when, one day, she came upon a want ad offering “twenty-five a week” to “any plain-featured young woman, preferably a high-brow, not afraid of clerical work,” she laid aside her dignity enough to respond.

She had winced on discovering that the job was with a detective agency, and that all that was wanted was a filing-clerk. But she was thirty-one, and there was the future to think of. So she laid aside her dignity some more, and even felt a satisfaction not altogether based on economics when McClue picked her out from the crowd of applicants, though the mode of selection was apparently nothing more scientific than the “Eeney! Meeney! Miney! Mo!” of a childish game.

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A few months later, he invited her into his private office.

"I am putting you in charge of the works," he said. "I need a balance-wheel—somebody who will attend to the routine—somebody who has been a galley slave and has never learned that eight hours is a day's work. Also somebody to take the wind out of my sails now and then. You are elected official whip, extinguisher and wet blanket. Name your own salary."

In the midst of a sudden conviction that the man had lost his senses, she had just enough presence of mind to name thirty dollars a week. He made it forty on the spot. And then it was that she saw for the first time that some of the thrill of the paper-bound chef-d'œuvre might have its counterpart in life.

So now, stimulated by some further experience with that world which does not care a tinker's damn whether a verb agrees with its subject in number and person or not, she permitted the taxicab to jounce her smile out of all semblance to anything calmly superior and into a very unschoolmarmish grin.

"I suppose you are going to tell me again that the check in that envelope is the largest one you or any other detective ever received," she

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said, "and that it bears the name only of the bank from which it was issued—as if a cashier's check ever did give the name of the true remitter. But the job, as I understand it, is to find out what is going on at Ivy Towers, and you can hardly expect to discover that—before we arrive."

"Sane," murmured McClue; "always safe and sane! But say what you like, Clara, I have discovered something new every time I have read this letter. It's obvious, for instance, that this 'Anxious' is a personage—the amount of the check shows that. He must be at the head of some big interest, or else retired."

"Or else," the lady supplemented, "a young spendthrift just come into a fortune."

"No, I'm sure he's old. A young man, worried about some girl, say, would never have kept out of sight. He'd be boring us to death with details. And now I can tell you another thing. Old Mr. 'Anxious' doesn't live in St. Louis, where the check comes from, and he has no connection with the motion picture industry, as the blind advertisement I am to use to reach him seems at first to suggest. St. Louis and the movies are merely herrings drawn across the trail.

"Furthermore, he is a judge of human nature. The one thing which could have induced a man

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like me to look for rats in the garret of a place called Ivy Towers in a dinky little town along the Connecticut shore of Long Island Sound, is this appeal to my curiosity—which, confound him, he had divined! In the way of business I only investigate *crime*. We don't bother about cases involving what is probably nothing worse than the moral hazard of Presbyterian nephews exposed to the contamination of, for example, Congregational surroundings—not as a general thing and in the vacation season.”

“Not unless the fee is satisfactory,” admitted Miss Hope. “But a minute ago he was a personage. Now you are trying to make him out a fool. And how do you know we are not investigating a crime?”

“Not in his opinion, at least. He would have mentioned a crime. And the size of the fee wasn't intended to tempt me with money but to intrigue me—unless he really is a fool. Your hypothesis——”

“It *wasn't* my hypothesis. But this ‘dinky little town’ is worth a visit on its own account.”

Miss Hope drew a country girl's own deep breath of contentment as the road entered a yet more exclusive section, where the sidewalks—as if sniffing at the very idea of pedestrians—were broad strips of carefully trimmed verdure. Stately mansions looked down from retired and

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woody eminences on the right, and a flashing view of the Sound was to be had ever and again from between the no less stately dwellings on the left.

McClue nodded.

“Looks like the social annex of Wall street—the sort of community made possible only by the automobile, with land values rising as you leave the center. But while you are sizing up the lay of the land, don’t forget the village proper back there by the station. Maybe some of the Presbyterian nephews are nieces, and have been guilty of mingling with humble—hello! Here we are, unless I miss my guess.”

A bend of the road had disclosed what at first glance looked like a bit of old Europe dropped in the midst of an American landscape. It was a large estate, sweeping over the crest of a hill to the water. Upon the hilltop, so high that not even a cluster of enormous elms could hide it, rose a villa of brick and stone, in general outline not unlike the famous Castle in Edinboro save that it was more rambling, and broken here and there by towers and minarets. An architect’s dream, evidently, rendered substantial by some aspiring Croesus and venerable by a luxuriant growth of ivy.

As the taxi drew towards the entrance, the castle entirely disappeared behind a high and

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forbidding wall that bordered the highway and drew a sharp line between this Eden and the world at large. But another spectacle, even more foreign to the United States and the twentieth century, presented itself between the massive pillars which served as gate posts. For there fifteen or twenty men had grouped themselves—some dressed in peasant costumes, with leather jerkins and armed with matchlocks, knives or bludgeons; others strutting in plumed hats and gorgeously-colored doublets and hose, and with long swords swinging at their hips.

“I lose!” chuckled McClue, preparing to get out. “I said that ‘Anxious’ had nothing to do with the moving-picture industry.”

“Maybe he hasn’t. Merely because Ivy Towers—”

“Right again. They may be invaders. But for heaven’s sake find out who this place belongs to. I didn’t wait to make inquiries in the city, and the driver told me down at the station that he didn’t know—which is odd. And be sure to be passing tomorrow precisely at noon. Everybody will be getting ready for lunch, and I’ll be able to talk with you without attracting—”

“I—I hate to leave you here!” gasped Clara Hope, dropping her slightly supercilious mein as one might drop a mask. “It all looks so wrong.”

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"You!" The other, one foot already on the ground, turned in surprise. "It looks like a Shakespeare play, if you ask *me*. Probably they are murdering poor old Macbeth. But what disturbs your instincts, I suppose, is the wall. In building it so high the architect has quite succeeded in suggesting the terrors of ancient days."

"No, no! It's not that it's terrible here. It's that it's so beautiful; so peaceful. These people act as if they were having a perpetual holiday. They make me think of those rich Florentines in Bocaccio who shut themselves up in a palace outside of the city while the rest of the world was dying of plague. If there is anything wrong here it must be so awfully wrong, don't you see? So out of place, so unnatural!"

The detective's answering glance was like the sudden opening and closing of a pair of shutters, permitting just a glimpse of the inner seriousness of the man. Clearly he knew very well that he had not been summoned to investigate any trifling matter. But the next instant his eyes were laughing.

"You are certainly coming on," he said. "The next thing I know you'll be getting psychic. But as there was a serpent even in Paradise, there'll be nothing unnatural in finding a few at Ivy Towers."

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With that he started off across the road and through the crowd, making his way unchallenged by the simple ruse of acting as if he owned everything in sight. And a turn of the driveway swallowed him up.

Miss Hope wondered if she should have explained that her acquaintance with Bocaccio was limited to the properly expurgated excerpts encountered in a post-graduate study-course. Then her attention was recalled by a sudden commotion at the gate. A tall, scrawny fellow, whose leather jerkin was of a conspicuous newness, had seized his spear, and—after running a few paces, thrust its point into the ground. The result was a magnificent pole-vault. As he rose he lifted his body straight above his head so that at the summit of the arc he was able to catch the top of one of the great gateposts with his toes. An instant later he was standing upon the capstone receiving the applause of his companions.

“We know who wouldn’t be allowed to risk his neck like that—these days!” shouted a voice.

There did not seem to be much in the remark, except, perhaps, a veiled reference to some absentee not intended to be flattering. But the effect upon the athlete was startling. His face, until now rather inane, assumed an expression of such ungovernable rage that it was evident

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that he had not only the strength and agility of a monkey, but all of that creature's ferocity as well. However, another voice called from up the road:

"All right, boys—*picture!*"

Whereupon the hero of the gate-post climbed down, and the whole company began to advance from its position, cheering, and brandishing its weapons like true warriors, conscious that the eye of history—or of a camera—was upon them.

Miss Hope had been about to order her driver to take her back to town. But now she could think of nothing but that inexplicable look of hatred—and the fact that the gateway was deserted. And since not even Mother Eve was able to resist the temptation of tasting of the tree of knowledge when opportunity offered, it is not to be wondered at that Clara Hope, yielding to something stronger than curiosity, proceeded to dismiss her cab and entered the boundaries of Ivy Towers on foot.

Almost none of her experience at the agency had been practical field-work. She had merely docketed cases, studied reports and kept the office machinery running—often wondering, indeed, how it could be thought that she was earning her salary. And here seemed to be a chance to show what she could do. Her senses, undulled by familiarity with danger, might dis-

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cover something which McClue would be likely to overlook—an all-important something which appeared to hang over the place like a sword suspended by a single thread. No doubt her imagination was excited. No doubt, too, she was unconsciously yielding to another and more obscure influence, of which she was as little aware as she was of the enormity of her offense in disobeying orders.

She found herself pacing a broad drive, twisting in and out among dense masses of exotic shrubbery so arranged that the view was always shut off not more than a few yards away in either direction. It was as if she had been caught in an interminable labyrinth—an idea which subsequent events abundantly justified.

She was, however, no longer alone. Though McClue had entirely disappeared, fantastically dressed people—women as well as men—were wandering about everywhere in little groups. They looked ghastly, some of them, in the hideous yellow face-paint, which, as she then learned for the first time, is used instead of rouge in making up for the screen. But all seemed to be enjoying themselves, and nothing like work was anywhere in evidence.

“This must be a rest-hour,” she said to herself. “At least, if I were managing the place, I wouldn’t let that little act down by the en-

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trance serve as an excuse for all these others remaining idle."

And then it began to dawn upon her that this atmosphere of luxurious indolence was just what she had always imagined—not of Movie-dom, but of Bohemia. These people had the air of being rich amateurs. She had heard of those colonies of occultists in Southern California, which cultivate—often with serious consequences to themselves and others—the art of dreaming life away. Was there something of this nonsense here? Certainly there was a far-away look in more than one pair of eyes, as if their owners expected to see heaven open before them at the very next step. A few hung their heads. The bottomless pit, perhaps, was what they were expecting.

A footpath, starting off abruptly, as if *it* at least had a definite object in view, lured her from the main drive; and soon her attention was drawn to a man and a woman sitting on the edge of a small marble fountain in the midst of a lawn.

The man had his back half turned, so that she could not see his face. But here at last was a suit of ordinary citizen's clothes—ordinary, that is, inasmuch as there was nothing theatrical about them, though, considering the weather

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and the fact that this was the country, their black correctness seemed rather extreme. He even wore a silk hat and carried a pair of dark kid gloves.

These details entered Clara's consciousness but vaguely. It was only the next day, when anything which looked like information had become of an almost awful importance, that she found herself groping among her early, unregarded impressions and trying to make them yield a picture that was suggestive and distinct. And even then the hat and gloves told her nothing but the story of one who had come up in the world and wasn't quite enough at home in his new position to treat its dignities with sufficient carelessness.

She had come quite near, taking care to keep out of sight and making the most of a bush or two growing beside the path, before it was possible to catch anything of the conversation. Then she heard the man remark:

"Really, there is no reason at all why he shouldn't do it. The danger amounts to nothing, and you must admit that it would look better."

"I don't care how it looks," responded the woman. "He simply sha'n't attempt it. We are going altogether too far."

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The speaker gazed directly in front of her as she spoke, and by cautiously parting a couple of branches Clara had a full view of her face.

What she saw came near making her betray herself by an exclamation of surprise and delight. Yet the woman was so beautiful that an ex-school-mistress, always in the habit of thinking of herself as hopelessly plain, might have been forgiven if she had looked with all the envy, hatred and malice described in the prayer-book. The woman wore a gown of a pale yellow tint, so simple as to amount to little more than drapery, and revealing a slender, girlish figure beneath it, though rather disguising the fact that she was above the average height. Her hair was of that unusual tint known as "ash blond," and hung loose down upon her shoulders. She was young—apparently not more than twenty—and had not spoiled her complexion with any artificial mixtures to make it photograph whiter than it was. Her eyes were large and blue. Upon her head in place of a hat was a wreath of yellow primroses, but little darker than her gown. And her feet, to complete the picture, were bare and as perfect as a baby's.

The man said something not distinctly audible, and walked away. And then this creature, whose features seemed to have been made for

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joy and laughter, suddenly covered her face with her hands and began to sob—the dry, racking sobs that come from the very soul.

The art of comforting people is not required to be taught in the public schools. Clara had no experience in it at all. But she slipped immediately from her hiding-place, sat down on the fountain's rim, and put her arm about the stranger's waist. It may not have been the approved procedure, but it appeared to be effective. A blond head fell on her shoulder, and for a full minute nothing was said.

Clara was acutely aware that it was a most absurd scene for a detective to be playing a part in. She knew also that she was being mistaken for somebody else. Indeed, when the woman finally lifted her head, a flash of indignant surprise swept the lovely yet wistful features.

"Why, I supposed it was Rosalie! What must you think?"

"I'm sorry," began Miss Hope, much embarrassed. "But you seemed to be in trouble, and I—"

She was interrupted by an impulsive and most unexpected hug, and a torrent of inexplicable words.

"You'll do! I must have been blind. You're Christie Johnson—the very one I've been waiting for."

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"There is some mistake, Miss—"

"Call me Philippa."

"There is some mistake, Miss—well, Philippa, then. I am not Christie Johnson. I am afraid—"

"Oh, don't be *afraid*! Go and tell Mr. Farlow that you *are* Christie Johnson, and that I said so. He can't say I'm mistaken—again."

"Again?" Clara's throat had gone so dry that she could hardly get out the word, for her only thought now was that she had stumbled into an insane asylum.

"Yes, *again*," came the rejoinder. "It will be the third time if he does. Why, you're getting better and better!"

"Very well," agreed Clara, quickly getting to her feet. "I am Christie Johnson. And you, probably, are Ophelia—with your wreath and all."

"Of course I'm Ophelia. How strangely you talk. But I suppose you are still put out by the foolish way I acted a moment ago. Hurry and find Mr. Farlow—that's a dear. He left here only just now."

Clara departed in the direction taken by the man in a black coat, but as soon as she was beyond the first turn in the path she made a wide detour and headed back for the gate. McClue, she felt certain, would soon find out that they

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had been hoaxed by a message from some lunatic, and throw up the case.

But she had not gone far before the theory began to look untenable. Would a lunatic have been able to send a check from a bank away off in St. Louis? And was it imaginable that the inmates of an insane asylum would be permitted to go about in fantastic costumes—above all, to arm themselves with swords and spears? Moreover, the young woman who called herself Philippa hadn't seemed to be crazy. Laboring under some curious mistake, certainly. Nervous, worried, even alarmed, perhaps. But demented? No, the explanation could not be as simple as that.

Clara had but tasted the tree of knowledge as yet, and found it extremely tantalizing. As the afternoon was still young, she determined to taste more.

CHAPTER II

FIVE ACES

THE afternoon grew old, was pierced by long shadows, and expired in the treacherous arms of evening before Clara Hope finally set out for the gate.

She had passed the intervening time in a vain search for McClue. A rehearsal, interspersed with bits of actual production, kept the stars busy and made it easy to lose one's self in the crowd of hangers-on, or extras, whose chief duty seemed to be a waiting one. They were agreeable people, these supernumeraries, who asked no questions of strangers—being for the most part strangers themselves. And their unquestionable sanity was like a tonic.

They dined all together in a large room in the basement, far from personages of greater importance, and from them she learned that the Mr. Farlow, whom she had been advised to seek, was the producing manager of the organization. The Superba Film Corporation it was called, and though Farlow was not popular personally,

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his administrative methods came in for a great deal of praise. Other companies let supers shift for themselves when not actually employed. The Superba had them regularly enrolled, and gave them bed and board with a fine disregard of expense. So obvious was the extravagance visible everywhere that Clara found it more and more difficult as time went on to take the Superba seriously as a legitimate business enterprise. Was her imagination running wild in suggesting that it might be a magnificent and gorgeous blind?

This disconcerting thought, coupled with the continued invisibility of her partner, decided her finally to return to her prescribed duty and study the situation from without. Perhaps McClue had gone to the village already. What would he think if he did not find her there?

She reached the gate, filled with the determination to atone for her escapade by strict adherence to duty during the rest of the investigation. But it was too late. The gates were closed; locked. No one was about. There was a tiny lodge, but it was empty and bore the look of never having been inhabited. Apparently it was the custom of Ivy Towers to sever all connection with the outer world at nightfall.

No doubt there was still some mode of egress

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for those who knew the ways of the place, but she did not care to attract undue attention by making inquiries. She was caught as in a medieval fortress. Only moat and drawbridge were lacking.

Returning to the dinner-room, she was forcibly reminded that she had no place to sleep. The obvious course would have been to hunt up Farlow or Philippa. But Philippa had called her by another's name, and she was far too much in the dark to approach Farlow as yet. McClue's disappearance had shaken her more than she at first realized, and her belief in her own powers as a detective, or as anything else, was rapidly on the wane.

As the others began to disperse for the night, Clara was reduced to the expedient of prowling about and pretending to be at home. The public rooms and corridors were dim, lighted chiefly by the faint streaks coming in through the tall, narrow, tessellated windows. Just the place to see ghosts if one were a nervous person. Yet—let it be admitted that time had somehow slipped back into the middle ages, there was nothing that could not be accounted for, unless it was a curious sort of ornamentation which had been adopted for most of the lofty ceilings. Vague shapes, not unlike hornets' nests, depended everywhere from the open beam-work—whitish,

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globular objects that would hardly have been visible save for the faint reflection from their own polished surfaces. Wondering what they could be, and astonished still more by the careless superintendence which took no note of her presence, she crept up a flight of stairs within one of the rear towers.

Reaching a balcony, she felt more comfortable, and spent an hour or so looking out over the grounds which sloped away to a shimmering stretch of water. Upon the horizon beyond, a bank of black clouds had piled itself, like the wall of some yet vaster estate enclosing the whole region. Here, she knew, must be the Sound, with familiar Long Island itself in the distance. But under a late-rising moon it looked—wooded grounds, water and all—more and more like a beautiful yet sinister bit of fairy-land.

Seated on a heavy oaken stool, her head in her arms, her arms upon the balcony rail, she let imagination for once have its way. What aroused her finally was a brightly illuminated parallelogram on the lawn at her feet. It came from an open window just at her right, and while she stared, wondering how long it could have been there, a bell somewhere in the pile of architecture overhead began to strike. She counted twelve strokes.

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"Five aces!" The words cut through the air with the harshness of broken metal.

"You must be doped as well as crooked to try any trick as clumsy as that."

"The fifth ace doesn't happen to be mine," came the reply. "You pretend to find it in the discard. My opinion is that you found it up your sleeve."

"Gentlemen!" It was a third voice, and like oil trying to pour itself upon troubled waters. "Gentlemen, don't let us have any trouble. The pack must have been imperfect when we began to play. Nobody counted it."

A number of exclamations, some frankly profane and incredulous, others doubtful but conciliatory, followed, and Clara turned just in time to see a door open, throwing a bright glare into the great, bare, circular apartment through which she had lately groped her way.

Out of the door strode a man she had never seen before. He was dressed in one of the Shakespearian costumes so prevalent that afternoon—silken doublet and hose, a plumed hat thrust on the back of his head, and a jeweled sword-hilt sparkling on his hip. But what was most noticeable as he crossed the circular space and disappeared into the comparative darkness of a corridor, was his commanding height and

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the grace of all his movements, which anger merely intensified.

Three others followed—or at least emerged from the card-room. But they were in less of a hurry, and paused to exchange a few words before dispersing. One of them wore a long black coat, somehow familiar, and they all appeared to be regretting the incident of the five aces—congratulating themselves that nothing serious had come of it.

When they had gone, Clara thought for a minute that she was alone, and was considering the advisability of looking for some better place to sleep, having in mind a couch or a window seat—with upholstery if possible. What held her back was the light which still streamed from the open doorway. And then from the card-room itself stepped another figure.

Like he of the plumed hat, this fellow was tall and muscular. But there was no mistaking that buff leather jerkin. It was the monkey-man whom she had seen doing tricks at the gate. His eyes followed the route taken by his recent companions, but he made no move to go in their wake—just took a step or two towards an ascending flight of stairs which began in a farther segment of the tower-room, peered for an instant down its descending counterpart that had

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its head near the balcony, gave a hurried glance about as if looking for some enemy lurking in the shadows, and retreated as he had come, closing the door after him.

The interior was almost pitch dark again, and a few seconds later the rectangle on the lawn itself went black. Clara was left with her moon. But she could not recapture that feeling of solitude. Unless its occupant had retired through some inner door, the room beside her was still occupied; and somehow the hypothesis of his having retired seemed unlikely. So the question arose—what was the man's errand there in the dark?

Of course it was possible that it was his bedroom, or that he had turned on a light in another part of the suite. But her mind refused this supposition. She was unwilling to accept *any* simple and honest explanation of the conduct of the wearer of the buff jerkin—and for this reason:

While standing there, silhouetted in the door-frame, his face had been in shadow; but when he turned to go back she had caught a clear view of its expression. It was fairly murderous. She kept imagining that she heard him pacing up and down the darkened card-room, muttering imprecations, and—waiting.

Gradually, however, the whole great pile of

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masonry settled down to a silence which was as unquestionable as it was oppressive. She tried to divert herself by thinking of trifles—as, for instance, why these actors kept on their costumes after working-hours. But the solution of that puzzle was too easy. One had but to suppose a director with a theory of art, who insisted on having the cast play their parts consistently, day after day, as long as any particular production was on, so that they might become thoroughly imbued with the spirit of the work. This could not make her forget the gorilla in a buff waistcoat.

The balcony became unendurable. Even the fairy-land outside was less bright than it had been, and more than ever like some landscape bewitched by evil spirits. Clara Hope, lonely and forlorn, shivered in spite of the stifling humidity which seemed to have robbed the air of its last atom of life. She stole up another flight of stairs on her belated search for a couch.

As she did so, she became aware of the rhythmic click of a pursuing pair of heels.

Clara's own footsteps had been as soundless as shadows. But there was something absolutely clamorous about those heels. One pictured them as French of the tallest variety, with brass plates screwed on their bottoms to prevent running over, or else—according to the lat-

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est atrocious fad—of aluminum throughout. The wearer was either a servant girl, or a woman addicted to the bizarre in matters of dress—one whose toilets achieved success when described in the Sunday supplements as “sensational and daring.” But there was no swish of cheap silk. The clicks were wrapped in a silence suggestive of velvet. So Clara decided against a servant and in favor of an adversary of more importance.

Yet why an adversary? Instead of pursuing, the heels might merely be following her, quite by accident. Any moment now they might turn off towards some other part of the house. Clara cautiously ascended the remaining steps, and then looked down over the railing. To eyes accustomed to the gloom there was still enough light to see a moving object, especially if it should happen to be dressed in white; though it did seem as if the illumination, instead of increasing as it should have done with a rising moon outside, was gradually becoming less and less. And nothing moving was visible. Velvet! Black velvet, in defiance of the August night! The idea was not so chimerical, after all. And then, to her consternation, High Heels, instead of passing on below, turned and took the stair.

The room where Clara found herself was like

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the one beneath—huge, circular, and nearly empty; and it was lighted by a candle left burning in one of the sconces which were used in great profusion everywhere within Ivy Towers, after the manner of the *moyen age*. There was now, of course, considerable danger of being seen. Empty rooms lighted by candles offer little chance for concealment. She was about to dash for the beginning of the next stairway, trusting to her ability to combine speed with stealth, when she happened to notice a second candle—this one burning in an alcove just within the corridor, which, here as on the lower floor, led from the tower to the interior parts of the building.

The alcove was fitted with a divan—a discordantly oriental affair, heaped with pillows and tiger skins—and right beyond it was a screen. Not having time to reach the screen, Clara dived beneath the divan, which fortunately proved to be only a curtained shelf and not a seat reaching solidly to the ground. One of the skins slipped softly to the floor as she did so, and she hastened to drag it in after her so that nothing amiss might be noticed. There she lay, perfectly motionless, expecting to hear the other woman continue the ascent of the stairs. But all was still. Not a sound came from anywhere.

In an ordinary dwelling there is always a cer-

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tain amount of groaning and creaking going on at night. But the Towers was no flimsy construction, and when it chose to be still it was with an uncanny stillness like that of a vault. The slightest stir would have been as audible as the hoot of an owl. But no stir came. There was simply silence.

Clara held her breath, straining her ears in the attempt to detect some fresh evidence of that second presence. But all that she accomplished was to set her blood drumming painfully about her ear-drums. That which had arrived at the foot of the stairs had apparently ceased to exist. And then the candle in the farther sconce went out.

The incident was startling, for there had been no premonitory flicker. It looked as though her pursuer had come up stairs after all—perhaps in her stocking-feet. But as nothing further happened, Clara's attention began to flag. She was desperately tired, and the tiger skin made a very comfortable pillow. She might not have known that she dozed at all, only when she opened her eyes there dangled right before them a slender pair of legs encased in white, terminating in the daintiest slippers imaginable. Someone was sitting on the divan.

What surprised her most was that the slippers were not quite of the sort she had visual-

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ized on first hearing that staccato click-click on the tiling below. They were not so high, and there was something different altogether in the kind of ideas they evoked—ideas about the wearer. The clicks had aroused dislike; but to the look of the slippers themselves she found herself a partisan. What a fanciful simpleton she was getting to be! One shouldn't be so positive about the testimony of the ear—or of the eye, for the matter of that.

Yet it was curious that a woman should be sitting there. It must be very late. And a subtle change had come over everything. It was even darker than it had been immediately after the light went out, and the remaining candle gave an unsteady beam, as if it had burned down close to the socket or was contending with a draft. Moreover, the air was no longer quite so silent. Not only was her unsuspecting neighbor breathing audibly—and rapidly, as if laboring under suppressed excitement—but there was a sort of breath that seemed to inhale and exhale through the entire apartment—an entirely unhuman kind of thing. That Clara did not identify it at once as the wind argues that she was still but half awake. And from everywhere, within the pile and without, came vague singing and purring sounds whose origin it was difficult to locate or surmise. Finally there arose in the distance the

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unmistakable step of an honest pair of shoes.

Honest this time beyond a doubt. The heels came down with a soft *pad*, and made as a matter of fact less disturbance than had those French creations. But the tread was firm and swinging. The walker obviously was not thinking of going quietly—and was a man.

He came straight to the divan.

“Oh, my dear! At last!” he murmured softly, sitting down. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere. When I found you weren’t in the room—”

“I was restless,” responded the woman, after an interval during which it required no eyesight to detect the exchange of kisses.

Miss Hope was for an instant so scandalized that she was half minded to come out and make her presence known. Then she discovered, somewhat to her mortification, that it was only a little school-teacher who was scandalized—a little school-teacher, becoming very dim within an altogether different person. And this altogether different person felt strangely sympathetic even to a pair of lovers who chose such an unconventional time and place for their interview.

“—restless and nervous,” the woman went on speaking.

“What is wrong?” anxiously asked the man.

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"You haven't been quite yourself for weeks."

"I don't know what it is, dear. I feel depressed, and have horrible dreams. It's almost as if I were afraid of something—I don't know what. And then it goes away so suddenly when I—oh, I oughtn't to talk to you this way! I am ashamed. It's only nerves, I suppose."

"Yes, I suppose so. But you never used to be nervous. Can't we end the present situation somehow? It's getting dangerous."

"I know. But don't ask me to do anything yet. I'm so distrustful of myself."

"You're overworked."

"Possibly. But we mustn't sit here. Someone will see us."

The man laughed, not altogether mirthfully.

"See us—this time of night?"

"Yes; you can never tell who is around. I can't get it out of my head that we are being watched—all the time."

"That's nonsense."

"I hope so. But there's another thing. Leave Jean Estamps to do his own work—promise me!"

"Haven't I already promised a sufficient number of times?"

The tone implied an ill-restrained impatience; there ensued a pause.

"What is that?" said the woman, suddenly.

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"It smells like something burning. I've noticed it in this corridor before."

"Perhaps Yen Hui is offering incense to his ancestors," responded the man with an attempt at lightness. "Or maybe it is candle grease."

As for Clara, she could smell nothing except the odor of the tanned skin beneath her head, and while she was trying to, a catyclism shook the little world there beneath the divan—as if the tiger which had been slain and robbed to provide her with a pillow had come back to life, demanding his property. What had happened was this:

The couple, rising to go, had seen the projecting end of the skin. Unwilling that even this little bit of untidiness should be left behind as evidence that the divan had been occupied, one of them had laid hold of it. It must have been the man, for, finding the skin apparently caught fast, he gave it a powerful jerk. Man-like, he didn't stop to investigate, and having attained his end he passed on.

Clara's head was tossed violently against the bottom of the seat. The blow left her unconscious.

CHAPTER III

WHAT THE FERRET WAS DOING

McCLUE had walked up the winding driveway with an assumption of assurance which he was far from feeling. Ever since receiving that extraordinary communication from "Anxious," with its suggestion of things unsaid, he had been obsessed by the idea that he would arrive too late. It was a foolish notion, of an origin difficult to understand; but it had hurried his preparations. And now, as he entered The Towers by a huge front door, standing wide open as if to invite him, and without having been forced to speak to a soul, he realized keenly that he had rushed into a situation to which he held not the slightest clue.

On his way through the grounds he had seen nothing but a company of actors employed, apparently, in their daily routine; and a single dog. The actors were reassuring. As to the dog, that was rather another matter. It was a red, rough-coated Chow, and had gone slinking through the shrubbery, its bush tail drooping

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and its lips rolled back from its teeth in a sort of petrified snarl. There is nothing unusual in a Chow snarling at a stranger, for this four-footed aristocrat from China is distinctly a one-man dog, knowing no friend but its master. Only—the snarl did not appear to be directed at the stranger. The animal merely staggered along as if it were partially blind.

“The poor chap is sick,” was McClue’s mental comment.

And on reaching the house and finding his way into a large, deserted room on the second floor—clearly a library in a menage where there were probably few readers—he added half aloud:

“I wonder, now, if it would mean anything should the brute turn out to be poisoned?”

At all events, nothing of importance seemed as yet to have happened to the human population. There was no evidence of any excitement. A man was going to have a chance to look around. Perhaps it would be wise to retire, returning the next day with such information as Clara Hope had picked up around the village. He could then bring his baggage from the station—a collection of disguises and papers that would prove him to be anything, from a cook to a movie star. The library, however, offered too tempting a retreat to be at once abandoned.

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Even an empty room has its story to tell. McClue began to explore.

The view from the windows showed a profusion of lawns, trees, flower-beds, and a great pool or swimming-tank of white marble with groups of statuary at its four corners—rather too Italian to harmonize with the rest of the scene. Within, the effect was almost chapel-like in its severity. The windows were pointed, and with diamond-shaped panes; the ceiling was groined in true gothic style, and the oak panneling of the walls nearly black.

Then there were the books—dismally bound classics in complete sets, conventional in their selection and totally unused. A corner even revealed Patent Office reports and heavy green tomes bearing the imprint of the Smithsonian Institution. Strangely enough, one of these latter looked as if it had been much read. McClue took it from its shelf, and discovered that it opened of itself to an article on “Photographing by the Ultra-Violet and Infra-Red Rays.”

“I say—are you really interested in that?” came the unexpected inquiry.

McClue had taken a seat at a convenient table to study the volume more carefully, and now looked up to find a man of about thirty, with a closely trimmed mustache and an Englishman’s cast of countenance, regarding him with an ex-

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pression of almost comic seriousness. On his hands and even on his face were a multiplicity of stains in various shades of black, yellow and brown; and to complete the oddity of his appearance, his clothes—of expensive material and cut—were also stained and in urgent need of pressing.

“Interested?” returned the detective, taking it as his cue to be surprised at nothing. “Why, a fellow *has* to be interested in science these days, if he’s got any bean at all.”

“Funny I never ran across you before.” The Englishman sat down rather stiffly at the other side of the table. “My name is Lounsbury, as perhaps you know. Or haven’t you been here long?”

“Just came today.”

“I see—a friend of the management. I hope you’ll excuse me for asking such a rum lot of questions. But with all these artists and actor chaps around there’s seldom a chance to meet anybody of a different sort—excepting Philippa, of course. She understands photography, but only as an *art*.”

It was easy to see that Lounsbury had been for a long time starving for a thoroughly congenial companion; and though he appeared to think himself inquisitive, he had not even no-

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ticed McClue's failure to complete the ceremony of exchanging names.

"Ever try any of these experiments here?" asked the detective, tapping the open page before him. "They look very good—as far as they go."

"As far as they go? Then you've tried your hand at them." Lounsbury's face brightened with pleasure, though a sort of diffidence kept his mouth drawn tight at the corners in an expression of unconcern. "That's rather jolly, you know. Prof. Wood's article is, of course, merely popular. But have you read any of his things in the *Astrophysical Journal*, or Dr. Hemsalech's work on dark luminosity? Wonderful possibilities—"

"And a lot of difficulties," put in McClue, feeling his way.

"Right! If I only had time—but naturally, as head of the camera work here I'm busy with art stuff, much of which it's impossible to spoof. I say, though—would you care to look at the laboratory?"

"The very thing!"

McClue rose to return the Smithsonian report to its place, and accompanied his new acquaintance through a labyrinth of passages to a cubicle on the ground floor of a distant wing.

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It was a wilderness of bottles, tanks, carboys, tubes, retorts, electrical apparatus and such other contrivances as a man with a passion for chemical research would be apt to collect—unlimited funds at his disposal being understood. Here they spent the remainder of the afternoon, talking like two members of the same lodge.

Fortunately, the Ferret was a good deal of a chemist himself; otherwise he must have fallen into one of the many pitfalls which such a conversation holds for the uninitiated. And he became so interested in Lounsbury, personally, that he gladly accepted an invitation to dine in the laboratory, where the photographer, it appeared, often took his meals. And later, by complaining that he had not been lodged to his taste—"Big rooms, you know, but too fancy for a man to putter around in and perhaps make a mess,"—he succeeded in being offered a comfortable sleeping-chamber on the second floor of the wing and next to Lounsbury's own.

"It will be jolly to have you," exclaimed the now openly enthusiastic host. "And as for making a mess, you can have a corner of the lab for your own. But I say—I didn't catch your name."

"McClue."

It was the one answer possible in the face of such genuine hospitality. Besides, it said noth-

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ing. Only to a criminologist would it mean anything without either "Ferris" or "the Ferret" prefixed.

"I thought I was doing very well," the detective confessed to Clara afterwards. "A real friend and a foothold at Ivy Towers seemed worth a little wasted time. But to think that everything important connected with the mystery of what happened later passed before the eyes of one or the other of us during the first twelve hours or less that we were floating loose about the place! The pieces were already on the board, and we handled every one. If we had only recognized them, Clara, we could have foreseen every move and maybe have stopped the game. As it was we were exceedingly lucky in what we happened to observe."

McClue was right. The events of those afternoon and evening hours, seemingly so trivial and unconnected, were in reality the threads of one pattern then being woven together upon that great Invisible Loom which everybody names to suit himself and nobody comprehends. But, with the pattern incomplete, how insignificant and chaotic it all seemed!

The Ferret retired early, but without undressing, and woke shortly before midnight, as he had promised himself to do. It was sultry; there was a curious, electric tension in the air.

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Going to a window, he noticed a feeble moon and that a storm was brewing. Nothing else could account for the oppressive, unnatural hush which hung over everything. A man, still in theatrical costume, was pacing backwards and forwards along a path only a few yards away. He was the single object in the visible universe that seemed alive.

McClue descended to the laboratory, found an outside door, and stepped cautiously into the grounds. With definite quarters to claim, and even a friend to refer to, he felt sufficiently sure of his position to run the risk of a little tour of inspection. But the man in costume had gone, and the grounds were so utterly deserted that they seemed never to have been blessed with a human presence. He remembered the sick dog, and wondered what had become of him. Even a snarling Chow would have been company out there in that moon-haunted garden.

“Good Lord!” he growled to himself. “In a minute I’ll be seeing spooks. This is what comes of having nothing tangible to go on.”

A long circuit of the building, however, brought something tangible enough. It was nothing of seeming importance—just an open window into one of the kitchens. But McClue regarded it thoughtfully before climbing in over its sill. On as hot a night as this, an open win-

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dow might mean nothing at all. And yet, since there was no locking up, there should have been a watchman.

"Perhaps they depend upon the Chow," he mused. "Mighty poor reliance. Myself, I'd rather have a burglar alarm."

He had just missed seeing that rectangle of light from the card-room, and the listening figure of Clara Hope on a second-story balcony. When he passed that way the light had already been extinguished, and every window in the Towers looked dead. Dead and dark it was also throughout the basement and ground floor.

He reached the front without obtaining anything but a general idea of the disposition of the principle rooms, and was beginning to mount a broad flight of stairs, when the darkness ahead of him seemed to move.

McClue stopped short in his tracks. If anybody were running from him, that person didn't belong there. And if a person was there who didn't belong, it might be well to use a little strategy. Remembering the open window, he ran on tip-toe back to the kitchen.

"If I am to catch that fellow," he ruminated, "my only chance is to stay between him and his get-away."

But nobody appeared, and half an hour and more slipped by in uneventful silence.

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After that, the detective had a feeling that he was merely wasting time, that the night's drama was being continued in some other place. A return to the spot where he had caught his uncertain glimpse of the supposed intruder was more fruitful. From the hallway above he could distinctly hear a man and a woman conversing in low tones. He even caught the words:

"I thought so, too, but we've looked everywhere now. We must have been mistaken."

But when he went towards them, treading as softly as a cat, the talkers became silent and slipped away. Further exploration did nothing but speed the passing moments. McClue looked at his watch, and saw from its luminous dial that it was half past one. It seemed that he might as well go to bed. But nothing any longer suggested sleep. For some time now the earlier hush had been disturbed by the means of a slowly rising wind.

He wandered about for perhaps another thirty minutes, expecting a heavy electric storm and wondering why the thunder and lightning did not begin. There was finally a sudden dash of rain and then a blinding glare. It was as if the delayed discharge of all the electricity in the atmosphere had been gathered together into one devastating bolt, and McClue braced himself in-

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stinctively against the crash of the anticipated thunder. But no crash came. Instead of that, the glare held on, silent, inexplicable, of a hideous greenish blue. It was like a lightning flash caught and held, immovable, in mid-air. He felt his senses reel before the miracle, and the notion crossed his mind that he had been struck—that he was out of his senses.

CHAPTER IV

MURDER

WHEN Miss Clara Hope recovered from her experience with the tiger skin, she could not for several seconds remember what had happened. It was totally dark; her head ached intolerably; and she had no idea where she was. Reaching up, her hand came in contact with a hard, flat surface, and she nearly collapsed again—it was so like the hard, flat inner surface of a coffin lid.

Then she remembered. She was lying under the seat in the alcove, and she had bumped her head—that was all. She didn't know how long she had been there, but it didn't matter. She was alone. Nobody had seen her; and her bed, though hard, might have been worse. These were her first coherent thoughts, coming in a sudden rush of relief. Those that followed were not quite so reassuring. True, she hadn't been buried alive, and appeared to be in no sort of personal danger. But the more she recalled of the conversation she had overheard, the more certain she became that something serious was afoot.

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“It’s almost as if I were afraid—I can’t get it out of my head that we are being watched,” the woman had said. “Leave Jean Estamps to do his own work.”

The man had worn long stockings, knee-breeches, and low shoes with fancy buckles—quite Elizabethan. And the woman—was she the one who had followed her? It was more difficult than ever to reconcile those dainty slippers with the metallic tap-tap of the high heels which had started up the stairs. Were there two women?

“I half believe I dreamed the whole thing,” she said to herself. “Perhaps this very minute I am at home in bed, and—”

But that solid planking above, and the hard tiling beneath her, precluded the idea of a bed. And what if the man had seen her, after all, and left her there—for reasons of his own? He might have been unwilling to startle his companion by dragging out a hidden eavesdropper before her eyes. Perhaps only a very few minutes had elapsed. Possibly he was on his way back even now.

Creeping out from her undignified position, Clara hurried into the circular room. The wind, unburdening itself of a sudden gust, went whining through the tower like a wounded animal. A door slammed. Then something

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could be heard approaching along the corridor.

At first she thought it was just another freak of the wind. But the wind does not move with the sound of running feet. Was the man who had snatched the tiger skin really coming back? It was a human figure—that was certain now. And it passed swiftly within three feet of her, making for the stairs to the floor below without showing any awareness of her presence. Only a very feeble glow came in from the window. Being overlooked was not surprising.

It was now more than an hour since McClue had come upon *his* flying intruder, but of course she didn't know that. What most impressed her was the circumstance that the man—and it must have been a man, since a woman, embarrassed with skirts, could hardly have made such speed, even in a panic—the man had seemed to have no face. It needs to be very dark indeed if a person passing within three feet of one doesn't show at least a pale oval blur to serve as features. Could it have been a negro?

"A burglar wearing a mask, more likely," she decided.

Yet why would a burglar run in such frantic fashion when the corridor behind him was empty? There had been no hue and cry at his heels.

Just as he reached the stair-head, Clara heard

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a sharp, metallic tinkle. The sound kept repeating itself for several seconds, as if some small object were rolling down from one step to another. The steps being of stone and uncarpeted, it was piercingly distinct. Rather frightened now, and inclined to give a sinister meaning to everything, she walked to the window and looked out, anxious for a sight of the normal and friendly. But nature had become fearful—a turmoil of wildly tossing tree-tops and flying clouds barely discernible in the light of a moon that was being wrapped in ever thickening veils of darkness and for increasing intervals blotted out altogether.

From her infancy Clara had never been able to shake off a constitutional fear of lightning, and always if caught alone during a thunder storm she felt like hiding her head under a heap of bedclothes. As yet no electrical disturbance was manifest save in a peculiar tension in the atmosphere, but the impending threat of the familiar jagged flashes with their answering reports was sufficient.

“I was so startled by the change that had taken place,” she subsequently confessed to McClue, “that it was minutes before I even thought to spare myself by drawing away from the window. I fancy I must have been more afraid of that empty corridor at my back than of the

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storm, itself. I even stepped out on the balcony. And there, leaning against the railing of the corresponding balcony on the floor below, was the top of a ladder. I looked away over the gardens, fascinated in spite of myself by the wierdness of it all, and when I looked back again—*the ladder had moved*. It was now projecting horizontally, and someone was drawing it in through the window.

“At the same time the clock in the tower began to strike two, and almost exactly on the second stroke—but you know what it was that happened then.”

McClue did know, and so did Clara when she told her story. It was that seeming miracle that enveloped Ivy Towers and its grounds in a steady, greenish-blue radiance, refusing to abate and giving that nerve-racking sensation of something gone wrong with the laws of nature. Clara had groped towards the stairs, shaking with dread in anticipation of the crash of thunder which never came. She did not think even of a miracle at the time.

But shouts and excited voices were beginning to be heard. Men and women in various stages of dress and undress streamed into the corridors, asking each other what was the trouble and receiving no satisfactory answers. When Clara got down to the floor below there was quite

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a tumult. Groups were forming, their faces appearing death-like in that unnatural glare. But no crowd had gathered as yet in any particular spot. There was no focus to this disorder. And, strangely enough, vexation and astonishment rather than terror seemed to prevail.

She caught sight of McClue in front of the card-room—McClue, at last!—and hurried towards him.

“What is it?” she demanded, forgetting how unexpected her presence there must be to him, and the probable unwisdom of letting it appear that they were acquainted.

“The light?” he responded, showing neither disapproval nor surprise, and laying a reassuring hand upon her arm. “It is nothing, that part of it. But there may be—”

He stopped. A sharp cry had suddenly changed everything, bringing all this scattered bewilderment to a point. It came from the top of the flight of stairs leading to the ground floor, where stood a little, mouse-like creature that Clara recalled as one of her acquaintances of the afternoon—an extra player named Minnie Deyo, with whom she had in fact become quite chummy. Minnie had been seen to start to go down, and suddenly to recoil, and now she was clutching her hands together in a desperate effort to regain self-control.

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"Horrible! Horrible!" she kept repeating in a half-whisper that seemed to penetrate everywhere. "There has been an accident."

McClue and Clara Hope reached the spot at the same instant, and before the crowd.

"Hold them back for a minute," said the detective in her ear. "Make believe have a fit—anything. I must get a close look before this mob runs over everything."

Clara became at once conspicuous as an obstruction, forcing back everyone who approached, and crying:

"No, no, no! Wait! Wait!"—as if she had lost her reason.

It wasn't an altogether feigned performance, either. For she, too, had looked down the stairway, and had seen, half way between the top and bottom steps—the man in the new buff jerkin lying on his back, his head lower than his heels.

Head? In the rays of that unexplained light, every detail of his figure was as plain as if he had been lying under the noonday sun. And his head was a mere mass from which issued an ever-spreading stain.

McClue hurried back to his assistant just in time to prevent her from being overpowered.

"Stop crowding, please!" he ordered, in a voice which compelled obedience. "Someone

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has been killed. Come forward one at a time and see if it is anyone you know."

Then he began speaking soothingly to Clara, as if he wanted everybody to see that he was merely giving aid and comfort to a case of nerves.

"Is it really an accident, then?" she managed to whisper.

"No accident at all—it's the coldest blooded murder I ever saw. And—"

"It is Jean Estamps," interrupted one of those who had stepped up to view the body.

Clara Hope had not been educated for nothing, even though she did quail before solitude mixed with lightning and thunder. Her glimpse of that motionless figure lying on the stairs was her first sharp contact with death. But already she was able to marshal her thoughts into something like order.

"I have heard of Jean Estamps," she told McClue in a scarcely audible tone. "But it's terrible—nobody seems to be sorry."

"It's apt to be that way with a murder," rejoined the detective. "Until the guilty party is found, everybody is too busy being afraid to give much thought to the proprieties."

"Afraid?"

"Yes—of being suspected. But you're right,

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there is something back of the way they take it. One would say that they came expecting the worst—and that this wasn't quite it."

Clara turned away, disturbed by a new thought.

"Leave Estamps to do his own work!" That was what the woman in the alcove had said. She must have been expecting—what? And it might be that she was Philippa, the woman whose beauty had shown so spotless and pure beneath the primrose wreath. And her unknown companion that night—any of the fifteen or twenty men present might be he. As McClue had intimated, suspicion left absolutely nobody out.

Naturally Clara left herself out, but she soon began to feel that others did not. From their point of view she was a young woman who had appeared from nowhere, attempted to view the body with a show of unconcern, and broken down. And there she was, at two o'clock in the morning, neatly dressed in a tailor-made gown. Who was she? What was she doing there?

These questions seemed to be shot at her in every glance she encountered. She flushed, and found it difficult to lift her eyes.

"I wonder if you feel as guilty as I do," said a voice in her ear.

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She turned. Beside her stood the little mouse-like person, Minnie Deyo.

"There! I didn't mean to startle you," Minnie went on.

"But I *was* feeling just as you say. Folks look at me as if—"

"I know. They look at me that way—and I at them. I heard what that man just said to you. He's right. But there is one person who doesn't suspect either of us—remember that."

"What person?"

"The one who did it—if we only knew who it was."

Clara nodded, and moved towards the window. After all, the real danger was that of being suspected of being a detective, and Minnie's eyes were alarmingly keen. A moment later, the light in the room began to fade, leaving the grounds without shimmering like a landscape on some strange planet beneath a ghostly midnight sun. One could even see a bit of wall off in a direction where must lie the Sound. And clambering over the wall was a man. Then the landscape itself disappeared in total eclipse, while the room lighted up with ordinary electric lamps.

"Minnie, what does it mean?" breathed Clara, finding the girl again at her elbow.

"The lights? I don't know who is fooling

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with them, nor why. But of course you know what they are?"

"I don't."

"Poor child! Then you must have been half frightened to death. Didn't you ever see a movie taken? We have to work in that light, and half the rooms in the house are fixed up so they can be used as sets. Don't you see the globes and things hanging from the ceiling here? They call them panchroma arcs and rheostats, or something. There's a pair outside of almost every window, too—for we often want a picture with a vista reaching out-of-doors."

Minnie thought her explanation complete, little dreaming that the lights had long cloaked a secret far beyond her comprehension.

"But are there arcs in the bedrooms?" asked Clara.

"Of course not."

"Then how did everybody know that they'd been turned on? What gave the alarm?"

"Say, you are a clever one! You ought to be a detective. I never thought of that. The bedroom lights came on, too—at least mine did. Somebody must have been mighty anxious to rout us out. But where were *you* if you didn't know about the bedroom lights?"

Clara saw that she had made a slip, and was much relieved when Minnie added:

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“Look! Here comes Mr. Farlow.”

It was he, indeed—dressed almost exactly as he had been at the fountain. Detectives, then, were not the only ones who might have to explain the completeness of their attire. Farlow even wore a white lawn tie, which gave him something of a ministerial air. Yet she caught herself wondering if his manner wasn't a bit put on.

Without saying a word he walked to the stairs, examined what lay there, and turned to the company.

“This is very dreadful, my friends. Does anyone know how it happened? Who was it turned on the arcs?”

His voice, though trembling with deep concern, was softly modulated and agreeable. And certainly he had touched the root of the matter. Who could have turned on those awful globes save someone whose premature knowledge of the catastrophe it would be well to investigate?

“Well, then,” Farlow persisted, “has anyone sent for the police?”

This provoked some response.

“Why the police?”

“Estamps fell down stairs while practicing one of his stunts, it looks to me.”

“Have we got to have in the authorities—just for that?”

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“Wouldn’t it be better to call a doctor?”

Farlow brushed aside the objections with a trace of impatience. Estamps was far beyond the need of a physician. And as for death having been due to accident—

“We all hope it was,” he said. “But it seems to have been an accident of a strange kind, and it must have happened at rather an unusual hour for a man to be practicing athletic feats. Nobody saw him, I suppose?”

There was an uneasy silence.

“In that case, we’d better act at once. Let me see—oh, yes. Peter, you are here. Telephone the police station, if you please.”

“I’ve already taken it upon myself to ‘phone, sir.” Peter, who was a butlerish sort of person, stepped out from among the other servants, and added in a peculiarly dry tone, as if he needed no one to tell *him* that unheard-of things still awaited discovery:

“The line was dead, though. Perhaps the thunder-storm, sir. It’s coming on now, quite severe.”

Arrangements were made to send a limousine with a messenger direct to the station, and nothing further was said about the telephone. But it was only too obvious that the mechanical apparatus in Ivy Towers was misbehaving rather opportunely—for somebody. Then there was

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the ladder which Clara had seen drawn *in* from the balcony, and the man she had caught sight of climbing *out* over the distant wall. Of what strange pattern were these two facts a part? She was puzzling over this when an inquiry voiced by those around her cut sharply into her thoughts.

“Where is Philippa?”

“Has anyone seen Philippa Bell?”

“Miss Bell will be with you in a moment,” came the answer.

And out of an alcove corresponding with the one where Clara had hidden herself on the floor above, stepped a man apparently about twenty-five years of age, his face fairly haggard with anxiety. McClue suppressed an exclamation, and muttered:

“Looks like the fellow I saw outside studying the stars.”

Clara also felt a tingle of recognition go coursing through her veins. For the new-comer's shoes were fitted with fancy buckles of a pattern she could not mistake. She noted, too, that—standing fully revealed—he bore quite a striking resemblance to Estamps as she had seen him at the gate. Both were bronzed by life in the open air; both rather tall and slender, yet of exceptional muscular development. And both were similar in many of those indefinable char-

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acteristics which lead one to say: "I saw Jones on the street today, but he didn't know me,"—when all the while, perhaps, Jones may be a thousand miles away, and a very different man from the stranger Smith who in reality passed us by. Nature sometimes delights in pouring unlike metals into similar moulds. It had apparently done so in this case. For while Estamps had aroused a feeling of instinctive dislike, this other was unmistakably prepossessing.

"Who is he?" asked Clara in an undertone.

"That's Darehurst," Minnie responded.

"Is this the first time you have seen him?"

"Miss Bell was overcome by the shock of all this," Darehurst was saying. "She has fainted, that's all."

Everybody pressed in towards the alcove—and there lay Ophelia. She no longer wore a primrose wreath, and she had changed her dress to something more conventional. But she looked like Ophelia still; very pale and with her eyes closed, though her feet, instead of being bare, were in dainty slippers.

"High heels," murmured Clara involuntarily, "but not so high as those others must have been."

"What is that?" asked Minnie.

"Nothing—I was looking at her shoes."

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“They’re bedroom slippers. Maybe she was sitting up, reading—as *you* were, apparently.”

“I didn’t mean that I *suspected* her, Minnie. I was just thinking how lovely she was. Any woman would give her soul for such eyelashes. But why doesn’t somebody *do* something?”

“Don’t crowd around her,” Darehurst peremptorily ordered.

“I’m quite all right—don’t bother about me.” Philippa opened her eyes and spoke. “It was only that dreadful sight!”

With that she let fall her lids, as if the words had swept her back into unconsciousness. Clara drew away and found herself once more by the side of McClue.

“Did you hear that?” she inquired cautiously. “What could she have meant?”

“Yes, I heard. But I don’t know what she meant.”

“‘Dreadful sight!’ That was what she said.”

“Yes.”

“Then she must have seen it—on the stairs. You must have noticed her.”

“No, I didn’t notice her. I never saw her till this moment. If she was there it was before any of us arrived. But don’t distress yourself. It’s odd, but perhaps—”

He was unable to finish. In the circular room they had just left a woman began to scream.

CHAPTER V

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THE woman had entered unnoticed, and was standing at the top of that dreadful stairway, shrieking and wringing her hands. It took several men to drag her away to a heavy oaken bench along the opposite wall—the only seat in the room.

Clara was deeply moved, as no one could help being; but her sympathy was tempered with disgust. Such a frenzied demonstration looked theatrical. The woman, with her brilliant coloring, voluptuous figure and abundance of raven-black hair, was in her way as beautiful as anybody thus far seen at Ivy Towers, yet of a type which only a man would be apt to rave about. Her handsome, sleeveless evening gown was of an extreme fashion, very low as to bodice, swathed very tightly about the hips, and composed of black velvet unrelieved save by slashes here and there of dark red. And she wore French heels of such a height that it seemed more than likely that they were of metal throughout.

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"That is Olga Legrand," said Minnie, following Clara in. "It's too bad. But my! What a fool she is to rave this way. You can't tell whether she means it or not. And yet—why shouldn't she mean it? I really believe there was something between them."

"Who is she?" asked Clara.

"Our vamp."

"Eh?"

"Vampire. She plays the wicked woman parts—when we have any."

"Jean! Jean!" the vampire began to moan in a tone of grief which challenged skepticism.

"Come to think, how does she—how does anybody—know it is Jean?" Minnie went on. "I looked, myself, and he is—you know—absolutely unrecognizable."

"She must have recognized his buff leather jerkin. I noticed it at the gate. It is newer than any of the others."

"You noticed that? You're mighty sharp, Miss Clara Hope—about some things. And yet you didn't know what I meant by 'vamp,'—not right off, though you say you're a movie actress looking for a job."

"I said that I was a beginner. Minnie, you don't think—?"

"No, I don't think anything. But I know you are a stranger. And that good-looking man

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you were whispering with a moment ago—he's a stranger, too, to everybody but you. Why don't you tell me who you really are?"

"I—I can't. Not now."

"Oh-ho! You can't. You won't, you mean. Here's a pretty kettle of fish."

The mouse darted towards Farlow, as if to report the matter immediately. But she halted a few steps behind his back, throwing Clara a look half petulant, half amused, and altogether mocking.

"How does it happen, Miss Legrand," Farlow was asking; "how does it happen that you are so late in getting on the scene?"

The vampire lifted her head, and stared.

"What do you mean? Why do you say I am late?"

"There is no reason for it, especially, excepting that you appear rather after everybody else."

"I came the minute I knew there was anything wrong. I—Oh, my God!"

"You did? It's nearly half an hour since the lights went on. How long does it take to walk from your room? Or did you stop to dress?"

Olga rose and took a step forward. There was no doubting the genuineness of the passion which now blazed in her big black eyes.

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"How dare you ask a thing like that? What lights are you talking about?"

"All the lights in the place went on, including the panchroma arcs."

"But there was a thunder storm. I was lying on my bed with my head under the pillow so as not to see the lightning."

Clara, who had detected a covert defense of Philippa in Farlow's palpable irony, could not but be drawn to Olga by this naïve confession of a weakness which they had in common, notwithstanding the fact that at the time named there had *been* no lightning. But the inquisitor, though preserving his polite demeanor, went ruthlessly on:

"If you didn't see the lights, how did you know there was anything wrong? How do you happen to be here at all?"

Olga Legrand shrank back in her seat, put her hands before her face, and began to moan again.

"Surely you don't think that I— Oh! Haven't I a friend here?"

At this, who should step out but Philippa Bell, apparently quite recovered.

"I don't quite know as you consider me a friend, Olga," she said, seating herself beside the other on the bench and resting a reassuring

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hand upon her shoulder. "But I won't see you tortured at such a time as this. I understand."

"You, of all people! But you do understand." Olga clutched Philippa's hand, and went on:

"I heard folks passing in the hall, and somebody calling. I—"

"Was your door open?" put in Farlow.

"No, but I was so worried that it didn't take much to—"

"Worried? About what?"

"How can anybody ask that—in *this* house? I felt that something had happened, and no wonder, considering—"

To Clara it seemed as if Philippa arrested the speaker with a quick pressure of the hand. Anyway, there ensued a moment of dead silence, and even Farlow appeared to have lost all desire for further information, when he finally remarked:

"I was only wondering why you did not get up at once after you heard the shouts."

"I—I was afraid," murmured Olga, sinking back into Philippa's arms with a shudder.

"You were expecting something?" put in McClue.

"I was afraid—oh! Ha, ha, ha!"

Her voice in speaking had been deep and resonant. Now it rose abruptly into a shrill

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burst of perfectly hideous laughter, as if she had gone mad.

"Stop that!" commanded a new voice altogether. And in a stroke a burly looking person in a uniform with gold-plaited buttons and a gold star.

At his heels followed three assistants, and in a twinkling they had placed themselves so that there was a man in front of every possible exit. Olga Legrand grew silent, as if a hand had clutched her throat. There was something startling in this sudden advent of the Law. Even Farlow had to clear his throat before announcing:

"This is Chief of Police Bollar, from the village. Most of you know him, and you will all kindly put yourselves at his disposal."

Bollar, who was built like a bull, seemed to regard the remark as ill-considered.

"I guess I don't need anybody *put* at my disposal," he observed—or rather bellowed, the r's rolling from his tongue with a hearty burr. "I've been wantin' to see the insides of this place, and I'll do my own putting if it's equally the same to you."

Bollar wasn't the toadying sort of a peace officer one would have expected to find in a town whose very roadways proclaimed the prevalence of seven-figure fortunes. Perhaps the

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millionaires had elected him in self-defense, as a protection against the predatory, special-privilege-hunting instincts of each other. His courage and his common sense were as obvious as the closeness of his shave or the reddish tint in his hair. His head might be a little thick, as well as his neck, but he was incorruptible, and went to work with directness which showed his contempt for all finesse.

First he examined the body. Then he glanced about the room, and stooped laboriously to pick up a small object from the floor. An instant later he picked up another. It could not be denied that the Chief had sharp eyes. Then, having been informed of the name and status of the deceased, he suddenly faced the company and demanded:

“Who saw him last?”

Farlow, Darehurst and three other men testified that they had played cards with Estamps till about midnight and had left him alone in the card-room; but none of them mentioned the quarrel.

“Well, after that?” snapped Bollar. “Anybody see him? Anybody pass through this part of the house? Anybody hear anything?”

Clara felt her conscience tug, but decided that she ought to consult with McClue before making

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a statement, and the general silence soon made her aware that she was not the only one who was holding out on the police. Not a word from any wearer of high heels about a nocturnal promenade; not a word about a conversation in the alcove, or of running through the corridor. Not a word about anything.

Bollar swept the circle with a look of infinite suspicion, and ordered Farlow to give him the name and a short account of everybody present. Nothing much came of this till Clara, herself, was reached.

"I really don't know who this young lady is," said Farlow in a tone of regret; "never remember having seen her before."

"Before what?"

"Before I came in here and saw—what you have just seen."

"But you're boss of this outfit, ain't you? Seems to me you might know who is stayin' with you."

"They come and go," explained Farlow, beginning to grow a little less suave under cross-examination. "This, you know, is not an ordinary movie troupe. Many of my artists are people of standing, and we are trying to create a new art rather than to produce popular films. We—"

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"Art, is it? Saints! Did I ask for a lecture? Or are you after readin' me an advertisement?"

"I mean—we are not compelled to watch the comings and goings of our people. They live here as guests, and if they have visitors I know they are—"

"Rot! Is there anybody here who's acquainted with this young lady?"

"Why don't you ask *her*? Perhaps—"

"She is a new member of the company," Philippa Bell unexpectedly volunteered. "She came to me this afternoon—that is, yesterday afternoon, of course—and I engaged her without consulting anybody."

Clara rewarded the maker of this amiable misstatement with a surprised glance of gratitude. But Bollar had already turned his attention to McClue, of whom Farlow was also admitting complete ignorance.

"Nobody here is acquainted with me," McClue spoke up quietly, forestalling with an almost imperceptible gesture a young man who was standing beside him. "I came yesterday morning, intending to pose as one looking for employment as an extra. But I happened to fall in with the head photographer—Mr. Lounsbury, here—and passed myself off as a visitor with a passion for chemistry. He was com-

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pletely deceived. I am a detective—present professionally. Here is my card.”

There was a stir at this, but Bollar, taking the card, tried hard to pretend that he had never heard of any such person as Ferris McClue in his life. His simple honesty of purpose was gone. Antagonism fairly bristled in his changed manner, and from that moment his common-sense method of procedure was obviously influenced by desire to overwhelm a rival.

To Clara, McClue’s tactics seemed little short of insane. There he stood, unmasked by his own act, with everybody—especially Lounsbury—eying him askance. He had even seemed to go out of his way to increase the Chief’s rage. Remarkable conduct, certainly. And one part of his statement gave Bollar an immediate opportunity for heavy sarcasm.

“Yesterday mornin’, eh? You came here professionally, yesterday mornin’! And I have been informed and can see for myself that the trouble in this place only happened about an hour ago. Who and what brought you here yesterday mornin’? Did you have a—eh—pre-moonishun? Maybe you dedooed it.”

“No, I was sent for.”

“By who?”

“That I am not at liberty to state.”

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The tone of the reply was unnecessarily provocative. But Bollar, instead of goring him with epithets, smiled with a provocativeness of his own.

“Drummin’ up business, I suppose,” he muttered just audibly. “And not a bad place for it, I should say, if it should happen, now, to be *divorce* business, or something like that.”

At this, the few still lingering in McClue’s vicinity discovered errands in other parts of the room. Clara shivered at the enormity of the idea. But, strangely enough, the Ferret smiled, like a man who has accomplished his purpose.

Bollar was now popular. He had badgered a stranger, and thus far had uncovered no evidence against any regular inhabitant of the place. But when he resumed his work, casting fierce glances into every corner and looking knowingly at door-knobs, window-casings and the very ceiling, the general enthusiasm began to cool. Hadn’t he already picked up at least three things from the floor? Clues, no doubt—and clues are disquieting, especially when slipped, unexhibited, into an official pocket. Clara was especially disturbed by the thought that the Ferret must have let some of the evidence escape him. He had not been seen to pick up anything at all. And why hadn’t she examined that tiling herself before the Chief

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had a chance to go over it on hands and knees?

"Has anybody lost anything?" he asked finally, getting to his feet.

No one moved or answered.

"Look in your pockets and see," he thundered, taking out a Mexican silver dollar and holding it up. "I found it here, so somebody must have dropped it. A man wouldn't be after mislayin' a good-luck piece without knowin' it."

There was some perfunctory fumbling, but still no claimant.

"Well, then, how about a sword? None of you gentlemen is in the habit of rigging himself up like a major general I suppose?"

"Why, yes," Farlow spoke up. "We were playing 'Hamlet' today, and most of the men wore swords."

"Then see if you can tell me who was carryin' *this* one."

He stepped back to the stairway, returning with a long, heavy blade surmounted by a jeweled hilt, which he carried suspended from a pocket-handkerchief looped around it. The storm outside had about subsided, but if a thunderbolt had dropped squarely inside the room it could hardly have created a greater stir. For from tip to heel the blade was covered with blood.

"Oh, yes, I understand the value of finger-

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prints," he went on, turning towards McClue. "But maybe we can get a bit of direct testimony, which 'll come in mighty handy in case our party knew a real dude sleuth was workin' on the case, and so took pains to wear a pair of gloves. Now whose sword is it?"

"It—he must have been wearing it when he fell," faltered Philippa.

"It wasn't *on* him," contradicted Bollar. "I found it several steps above him on the stairs."

"I recognize it," testified Farlow, after a careful examination. "It comes from a collection of antique weapons which we lease with the rest of the furniture of the premises. But I couldn't say who was wearing it. I leave my players pretty much to themselves when it comes to costuming."

"No doubt you do. And now, since nobody owns either the Mexican dollar or the sword, here's another trifle."

He displayed a magnificent cluster of diamonds set in a platinum hoop. Clara was wondering whether it could have been this or the dollar which she had heard tinkling down the steps, and then her thoughts were arrested by the surprise and consternation visible in the faces around her. Clearly the ring had been identified.

"Any of you people with social positions and

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workin' for art ever happen to see this before?" Bollar continued. "Or is such a trinket—it couldn't have cost more'n two or three thousand dollars—is it too common to have lingered in your minds?"

"The ring is mine," said Philippa, rising to her feet.

Bollar moved towards her.

"Are you sure of what you're saying, young lady?"

"Quite. Everybody here knows that ring. I wear it every day."

"Not *every* day. Think, now, don't you lend it sometimes? Didn't you lend it yesterday—to a gentleman, as a matter of fact?"

It was difficult to tell whether the Chief was attempting to bring out some circumstance favorable to the girl, or trying to trick her into telling a clumsy falsehood. But Philippa emphatically denied having loaned the ring.

"I wore it all day," she insisted.

"And it fits your finger?"

"Yes; let me put it on."

Bollar deferentially took her hand and himself adjusted the jewel.

"It's a little loose, lady."

"You've put it on my wrong finger. It should go on the middle. I never wear it on my ring finger."

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"But there's a crease here that looks as if you wore *something* there."

Philippa's eyes widened with unmistakable fright.

"I mean—I—hardly ever do."

"And your sure you were wearin' it yesterday?"

"I wore it last evening."

"When do you remember seein' it last?"

"A few hours ago, in my dressing-room on the floor above this at the front of the house. It must have been about midnight. I took it off and slipped it over a stick-pin on a cushion on my toilet table."

"Don't you know you lost it, struggling with somebody?" demanded Bollar, suddenly dropping his gallant demeanor.

But this time-worn stratagem to confuse a witness failed in its effect.

"I have had no struggle," came the steady answer.

"Not in fun, maybe? Not in actin' this piece you were all dressed up for?"

"Certainly not. I was playing Ophelia, and nobody struggles with Ophelia. As I told you, I had the ring at midnight—in my room."

"So you said! So you said!"

"Look here!" cried Darehurst, striding forward. "If you are going to insult this lady,

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I don't care whether you are an officer or not, I mean to—"

"Wait, young man. I'm tryin' to find out who murdered Mr. Jean Estamps. And I've only one more question. How many of you ladies was wearin' yellow flowers last evening?"

"I was," answered Philippa, signing Darehurst not to interfere.

"Anything like this?" Bollar plunged a thumb and finger into his vest pocket and carefully extracted a primrose petal.

"Where could he have found that?" murmured Clara to herself. "He hasn't been out of this room."

"It looks like a petal from my wreath," said Philippa.

"Yes, Ophelia wears a wreath, and drowns herself." The Chief nodded, as if glad of the opportunity of showing off a little literary knowledge. "I've seen this here 'Hamlet' play. Did anybody else wear a wreath?"

"No one else wore primroses, I am sure. But I might have dropped that petal almost any time during the day. I passed this way more than once."

"No you couldn't, lady—not where *I* found it."

"Where—where did you find it?" Philippa

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asked the question in a firm voice, but she had gone as white as chalk.

"I found it lying on—on, not under—the body of Jean Estamps."

"Catch her!" Clara called out.

But McClue had been watching, too, and it was he who leaped forward—just in time to receive Philippa's tottering figure into his arms and to carry her back to the bench which Olga Legrand hastened to vacate. And for the next few minutes there lay an Ophelia who looked so much like an Ophelia drowned that Clara trembled as she chaffed her hands.

After that, though Bollar showed unexpected consideration and refused to continue the examination, sending everybody off to their quarters as soon as possible, a new shadow settled over Ivy Towers. In vain the coroner's physician arrived and removed the dead body of Estamps. The shadow remained. A guard had been unostentatiously stationed outside the door leading to Philippa's suite.

But Clara knew nothing of this. Having helped to conduct Philippa to her rooms, she found her own problems settled by an invitation to remain there permanently. And in saying good night, Philippa took both her hands, and said:

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"Poor little Christie Johnson! I'm sorry we have let you in for such a terrible affair. It isn't what I hoped for you."

The voice was so sweet and solicitous that the strangeness of the words was forgotten. Philippa was her friend. Of that she felt certain. And contrary to her wont, she felt her heart opening to a new acquaintance.

It was a wonderful room in which Clara finally found herself alone at about four o'clock in the morning—spacious beyond her dreams of luxury and opening directly off of Philippa's private hall. Its furniture, simple and solid in some dark old wood, had a lustre so soft with age and polishing that to touch it was to be surprised by the hard, cool surface where one had half expected to find something yielding and velvety. In fact, it was like a room in an ancient English castle, with the addition of every conceivable modern convenience.

In the morning she woke early from sheer habit, and found an exquisite breeze, touched with cool slant sunshine and the breath of flowers, creeping in at an open window and giving a feeling as of spring to the beginning of an August day. A maid, who said that her name was Rosalie, appeared never to have gone to bed, for she came briskly in while Clara was

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looking in vain for some clothes to put on. The precious tailor-made, it seemed, had been taken away to be pressed.

"And Miss Philippa," the maid continued, "wants to know if you won't please wear this."

She indicated a white morning gown of the light and fluffy order, which she carried on her arm—a gown showing here and there touches of pale blue. Clara, having no choice, tried it on. The fit was marvelous. This couldn't have come from the wardrobe of the tall and stately Miss Bell. It looked more like something wrought by magic, though perhaps it was merely the property of Rosalie, herself. And nothing would do but Clara's hair must be arranged in a new and fluffy manner in keeping with the new and fluffy garment. Then Rosalie turned her amazed subject over to a long cheval-glass.

Clara caught her breath. The school-teacher and the detective both were gone, and in their place stood a lovely young person who seemed all her life to have done nothing but dream in delicious idleness in a world which was perfectly willing to give her everything she wanted.

"Miss Bell says that you are one of those women who have a good figure and a perfectly delicious complexion without knowing how to set them off," smiled the maid. "She wants to wake you up, she said."

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"I feel so conspicuous. People will look at me!" Clara complained.

"I shouldn't wonder."

"But why should she want me to have such clothes? What difference does it make to her whether I—"

"If you knew Miss Philippa as I do," interrupted the other, "you would know that she always has the most lovely reasons for everything. And now I have been told to leave you to get used to yourself. You will find breakfast in the great hall downstairs, or on the porch out of it. People choose their own hours here. You are not to be with the extra people any more."

Clara hastened to the great hall, anxious to have breakfast over before anyone should be stirring. She felt her cheeks burn with self-consciousness, and half expected that the first person she met would order her into some part of the house more in keeping with her station. But the hall was nearly empty, and a little table, ready and inviting with its damask and silver, lured her out upon a veranda beyond one of the eastern windows. The moment she sat down a waiter appeared, a touch of deference in his manner such as she had never seen in anyone, high or low, who ever addressed her before.

The service was like clock-work, as if the

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establishment had already forgotten its tragedy. And for a moment Clara forgot it, too. For the first time in her life she was conscious of being pretty—at one with the lovely morning breathing softly about her. And something in her heart simply insisted on exulting. She thought it was fine feathers and excitement then, but learned to know that it was a great deal more than that; more even than youth and the freedom from being plain.

CHAPTER VI

CONFLICTING CLUES

CLARA was dallying with a hemisphere of grape-fruit when the Ferret wandered in from the lawn. He looked haggard from lack of sleep, and though his eyes swept quickly over her borrowed finery he seemed to notice nothing unusual.

"I suppose you know we are up against a very mysterious and complicated case," he began, taking a seat opposite her.

"Mysterious?" she repeated, vaguely disturbed by his strictly professional manner.

"Yes; one can't say what may happen next. I've a notion to send you back to New York."

"I'm sorry that I disobeyed orders."

"Oh, it isn't that. But there is a tremendous force at work here—money. Hasn't it struck you that this whole moving picture plant is more or less phoney? And when money is at work—in the dark—it's dangerous."

"If that's all," returned Clara, brightening, "I'm simply not going to leave—unless you do."

"It would be absurd for me to leave. I—"

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"Would it be any less absurd for me? Besides, after what you have said, do you think I would let you stay here alone?"

She blushed furiously the moment the words were out. Somehow, that provoking dress made everything she said sound ridiculously feminine and personal.

McClue studied the napery for a moment, then took out a blunt-nosed automatic and shoved it across the cloth.

"All right, then," he capitulated. "But keep this by you. And now let's get down to business."

Briefly he told of his own experiences since his arrival, and listened to her story of the same period as seen from her point of view.

"Let me see," he summed up. "It was Estamps you saw at the gate performing athletic stunts. He seems to have been employed as Darehurst's understudy in the Filmdom sense of the word. That is, he was substituted for Darehurst whenever a part involved some dangerous action. The two men looked sufficiently alike, and with a little make-up the change could easily take place without detection. It's a common practice in all studios, though from what I've seen of Darehurst he seems quite willing and able to perform almost any feat by himself. We must find out what held him back. I should

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judge it was Philippa. But the real question is—why did a company like the Superba, engaged in trying to raise the film-drama to the realms of high art—why did it ever put on these low-brow stunt-plays at all?

“As to the couple you saw at the fountain, we’re sure that was Philippa and Farlow; and undoubtedly it was Darehurst and Estamps who were quarreling over the cards. You think it was Darehurst and Philippa you overheard in the alcove, but we don’t know who wore the high heels. I saw several pairs of high heels among the servants, and almost any of the women as well as Olga Legrand might have been wearing them between twelve and one.

“About the tinkle—we’ll say it was the Mexican dollar which you heard, dropped by the man who ran through the dark. It could hardly have been the ring, as that has a large bezel which would prevent its rolling. And it may have been neither. I picked up something myself at the foot of those stairs.”

He displayed a tiny gold box, of the shape and size of a lady’s watch.

“A snuff-box!” exclaimed Clara.

“Yes, it was probably used for snuff—once. I also found the ring and the sword and the petal—just where Bollar found them afterwards.”

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"But I didn't see—"

"You didn't see me find them? No, and you thought the Chief was scoring over me at a great rate. And now you are wondering why I didn't slip them in my pocket. But it would never have done not to have given the Law its clues. Why, without any clues at all, Bollar might have blundered on the truth and beaten us."

"Then you don't think he *has* stumbled on it—you don't suspect Philippa?"

"I don't suspect her—no. But I'm ashamed of my reasons. They are based only on psychology and moonshine. All the evidence is dead against her. Look at what you heard her say in the alcove. She admitted that she was afraid of something or somebody, and fear is a perfect motive. Then there is the petal."

"Yet you don't suspect her," Clara smiled. "I knew you wouldn't—I knew that you would see that she is lovely."

"So, you don't think I am as stupid now as you did when I gave my real name and address to Bollar?"

"I never—"

"Oh, yes, you did! I was watching you. But I figured that Bollar was going to play the bone-head and make himself unpopular. So the best way for me to get a solid footing was to

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make an enemy of him at the start. It's working, too. Even my friend Lounsbury, the camera-man, has forgiven me. And being admittedly a detective I can prowl around without anybody wondering. I can even sit here and chat with you, and nobody will so much as deduce that we have ever met before."

Clara felt a thrill of admiration. From her daily contact with him in the office she had never realized how keen and subtle her employer really was.

"I couldn't bring myself to share the snuff-box with Bollar," he went on. "That goes right to the root of things, and coupled with the fact that Philippa Bell was wearing a wreath of primroses—it's almost symbolical."

"How do you mean?"

"You've heard of the Primrose Path?"

"But there's nothing of that about Philippa."

"No, there isn't. But there is a sinister influence even over her—a sort of dreamy, self-indulgent, mystical atmosphere—like Greenwich Village, New York, plus luxury. Lounsbury is just a fanatic on science, while Darehurst makes me think he was once a cow-boy. But some of the others—I tell you, I don't like the looks of things. I actually feel relieved every time I come upon a bit of evidence that seems to point merely to some tangible and comprehensible

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crime—like the telephone incident, for example.”

“What about the telephone?”

“It was cut just inside the house and right next to a disconnecting switch. That was either stupid or mighty clever—I don’t know which.”

“I don’t think I understand.”

“Why, it was stupid to cut a wire when there was a switch so handy, providing that the one who did the cutting was an outsider. A burglar who couldn’t see that switch ought to go into some other business. But if it was done by anybody inside the house, it was clever not to tip his hand by betraying too great familiarity with the wiring. I like that kind of cleverness. It usually leads to somebody being hanged.

“The open kitchen window, the man I nearly caught on the front stairs, and the man you saw climbing over the wall—they’re good, honest clues, too. But that ladder of yours is uncanny. Why should a ladder be provided for a get-away when there was already an open window? If it was put there to make things look like outside work, why was it drawn into the house afterwards?

“The real mystery of the lights seems to be—

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—who turned them on, and why? And then—did you hear anything peculiar, Clara?”

“When?”

“While the arcs were on. I was standing with my back against the door of the card-room for a moment, and I distinctly heard a clicking sound—clicking, not tinkling or tapping. I know if I had a good night’s sleep I could think what it ought to remind me of. I have an idea that it was something familiar, with an unfamiliar change in it which has thrown me off the track. The peculiar horror of the method of the murder—”

“It *was* horrible!” assented Clara. “To be stabbed, and to fall backwards down—”

“I don’t mean that part of it,” corrected the detective. “In the first place, Estamps wasn’t stabbed—he was shot.”

“Shot? Why, the sword—”

“I’m coming to that. But look here.”

He took from his pocket a sphere of lead about the size of a pea, but slightly flattened on one side.

“Did you notice that little clock, Clara—an old-fashioned affair half way down the stairs, with two weights hanging below it on long chains? One of the weights is only a wooden form, and you pull it down to wind the other

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up—that's the sort of a clock it is. And I found this bullet flattened against the wall behind it. In a house like this, the heavy doors would prevent the report being heard by people in their rooms. Perhaps a silencer was used. Anyway, the lead went right through the works, stopping them at five minutes before two—about five minutes before the lights gave the alarm."

"If it was fired at the clock—"

"It wasn't. It was fired at the head of Jean Estamps, which at that minute must have been directly between the clock-face and a 44-calibre pistol in the hands of somebody standing near the top of the stairs."

"You are sure?"

"Yes; there are stains on the bullet, and under the microscope in Lounsbury's laboratory I discovered traces of brain-cells. But at that distance, in a very dim light—don't you think it possible that there was no intention to kill Estamps at all—that he might have been mistaken for somebody else?"

"You mean Darehurst," said Clara Hope, with an involuntary shudder. "But that clears Philippa completely. She would never have tried to kill *him*. They are lovers."

"It's only guess-work," said McClue thoughtfully, "and the records show that lovers are just the ones who do kill each other. But I've

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at least better grounds than that for thinking it wasn't Philippa."

"Tell me!"

"You forget—there were two weapons used; the pistol that fired this bullet, and the sword which was lying on the steps all covered with blood. Now Philippa, especially after what she said about seeing blood, might reasonably be suspected of having used either weapon. There is nothing to prevent a woman from firing a shot, or even attacking a man with a sword and perhaps slashing him over the head with it. But the party I am looking for did something worse."

"What was it?"

"Really, I'm not at all sure that Philippa wasn't present, and I oughtn't to let myself feel certain at this stage of the game that she didn't have a hand in it. Even my reason for thinking that she didn't begin the job with one weapon and finish it with the other is based only on that same old psychology and moonshine. But as to this it is absolutely conclusive—there was someone besides Philippa Bell on the scene.

"Don't ask me for details yet. They're rather too distressing. In fact the whole thing is so utterly bizarre that I can't quite believe it happened. Wait till I have found one little thing that is still lacking, and then the *method*

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of the crime, at least, will be finally settled."

He refused to say more, and when she urged him made a protesting gesture, as if he would like to put the whole matter out of his mind.

"It's no subject for breakfast," he insisted.

"Well, then, tell me—what do you suppose Philippa meant by calling me Christie Johnson? I was sure she was crazy at first, and even yet I can think of no sane explanation."

McClue stared blankly, then began to chuckle.

"I understand it now. That explains the dress, or the dress explains that. She was sane enough. You see, though you don't know it yet, you *are* Christie Johnson."

"You're just laughing at me."

"Yes, and at myself for not seeing it before. Exercise your detective instinct and you'll be able to penetrate *that* mystery without assistance. If not, I'll help you—later on. But now I must be going."

He rose, looked down at his puzzled assistant, and grew suddenly serious.

"If you are actually determined to stay here, Clara, see if you can find out from Bollar if there were any finger-prints on the sword. And here is a glove,"—he took from his coat pocket a woman's left glove of dark tan kid and tossed it on the table. "Try to find the mate to that. Then we must both look for another

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woman as tall as Philippa. When you heard French Heels moving about in the upper tower-room, she put out a candle, you say. Now that sconce there is rather high from the floor. A short woman couldn't very easily blow it—"

"I didn't say she blew it," Clara corrected. "The light didn't flicker and sputter as it does when you blow out a candle flame. It simply went—silently and suddenly."

"How do you know it was silent? The storm—"

"No, the storm hadn't come up yet. It was perfectly quiet."

"You don't think she had an extinguisher?"

"She wouldn't need to. She could have pinched it out with her fingers. And she wouldn't have to be tall to do that."

"Pinched it out with her fingers—of course! What a fool I am. This is important. We'll get something definite to start on at last."

McClue hurried away, eagerness to verify some new idea showing in every movement of his departing figure. But Clara, to her intense surprise, was not left alone. From behind a clump of potted plants which took up one corner of the veranda appeared Minnie, looking more sly and mouse-like than ever.

"So, you're going to make up to Bollar, are you?" she began, slipping into McClue's just

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vacated place. "And you're terribly angry because I've been shadowing your partner. But I was born in Cherry street, New York, and used to make my living by stealing from fruit-stands and carts, and hiding from bulls among the ash-cans. I could shadow *anybody*. When I was sent to the reform school, I used to shadow the teachers and get the examination questions in advance from right under their noses. You needn't be ashamed for Mr. McClue—he may be a very good detective. And you are even better—in streaks. Hiding under that divan and noticing people's feet was real Cherry street work."

"It's you who are clever," said Clara, realizing how completely she was at the mercy of this mite of a woman so far as secrecy was concerned.

"Yes, but I have stupid moments," was the answer. "I ought to have seen at once that you were both detectives. But you look just like the nicest teacher there was at the reform school. I guess you are only doing this to be near *him*, aren't you? It isn't your real profession. There isn't any really real profession for women like us—excepting marriage."

Clara flushed, and Minnie emitted a peal of elfish laughter.

"Don't worry, teacher; wild horses couldn't

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drag anything out of me. But did you know we were prisoners?"

"Prisoners?"

"Eh-huh. Bollar has established a patrol outside the outer wall. Of course you won't mind being shut in, but you see it means that he has something up his sleeve. He'd never go to all that trouble just to keep an eye on Philippa."

"Then that's good news."

"No; it only seems to be. For if he has got over suspecting Philippa he must have begun on something worse—and there is something worse."

"I don't see."

"Never mind. There's a lot of things I want you to do for me. In the first place, you can let me eat my breakfast in this lovely arbor. Then you can arrange it so that I'll never have to go back and be quartered with the supes. We're little better than upper class servants there. The stars will hardly speak to us. I am ambitious socially, and you can give me a standing."

"I?" returned Clara in surprise. "Surely you know that I am less than nobody. I don't dare even to tell who I am."

"You were nobody yesterday. But now every person in the house is aware that you are sleeping in Philippa's own suite. And I'm sort

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of blackmailing you, because I have guessed your secret."

"You want me to ask Philippa to give you a better room, and let you have your meals on this floor instead of in the basement?"

"It won't be necessary. Here comes the waiter. He'd have been here long ago only he wasn't sure that you were going to invite me to stay. Tell him that my place at dinner hereafter is to be next to yours. And I'll tell him later that you want Mr. McClue on the other side of you."

The waiter arrived before Clara had time to protest, and she ventured to act on Minnie's suggestion for experiment's sake.

"Yes, Miss," he responded, most deferentially. "I'll see to it." And he took Minnie's order just as if all parties had been accustomed through a long life-time to their present respective positions.

"Didn't I tell you?" exulted the gray-clothed minx the instant they were alone. "You're a somebody *now*! And if I can ever get the proper dresses, I'll be a somebody, too, and marry well. Have you seen Mr. Lounsbury, the head photographer? Well, you will. He likes me already, but it is awfully necessary for a girl to stand *in* if she is to get a man to take

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her seriously. You've made everything easy. Isn't there something I can do for you?"

"You might tell me who Philippa is," suggested Clara, strongly drawn towards her voluble little friend in spite of her earlier misgivings.

"That is some question, Clara. Nobody knows who she is."

"Nobody knows—?"

"That's the truth—or at least, I don't. If you want to know *what* she is, she's an *angel*, I think. But there is some mystery about her. I feel certain her real name isn't Miss Bell, and if there is anybody here who has the least idea where she comes from they are keeping it strictly to themselves. She's in some terrible trouble, too. I don't mean this present thing—old Bollar's practically arresting her, or anything like that. But before this—ever since I've known her—there's been something wrong. Jean Estamps was in love with her, and so is Darehurst and every other man in the place excepting Eddie Lounsbury. And she is in love with Darehurst, of course. But there's some reason why they can't be happy. If you find things out and think even for a moment that Philippa could do anything *wrong*, I shall just simply hate you and go back to living on the

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kitchen floor. I adore Philippa, though I wouldn't dare go and *work* her the way I'm working you. One day she even came to me and asked if I didn't think I looked a little bit like Christie Johnson!"

"That name—again!"

"Yes, Miss Detective. And I'm *not* going to explain. You are a little bit too proud of your *intellect*, and need something to keep you reminded that it doesn't find out *everything*. Besides, I heard *him* teasing you about it. Do you think I'm going to spoil a good tease? Let *him* tell you. Even if you guess, you'd better do that. Men like to have us women pretend to be thick-headed so they can show off. And I shouldn't be surprised if that was just what you are doing."

Clara didn't reply. The sound of excited voices came in from the lawn.

"There! The worst has happened," cried Minnie as to the two girls hastened out.

They found Bollar, Darehurst and Philippa at the center of a rapidly increasing group, and it soon came out that Philippa, taking an early morning walk, had been followed by one of Bollar's men and stopped as she was trying to leave the grounds. Philippa was speaking soothingly to Darehurst, who was quite beside himself with rage.

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"It is nothing, Alex," she said. "I didn't know we were forbidden to go out, but I'm sure he would have stopped anyone else just the same."

"It's everything," Darehurst retorted, with a look at her so curious that she quailed from it. "He has no right to keep anyone here. Until he makes an arrest we are all perfectly free under the law to go and come as we like, and he knows it."

The speaker turned from Philippa and shook a threatening fist in Bollar's face.

"You've no authority for this kind of thing," he went on. "You're trying a bluff of some sort, and don't dare deny it."

"I don't want to deny it," Bollar affirmed with provoking coolness.

At this, Darehurst seemed suddenly to become calm, and leading the officer to one side began arguing with him in a tone that did not permit the words to be overheard.

"Do you see how dreadful it is?" whispered Minnie. "Bollar has really suspected Darehurst from the first, and has only been trying to throw him off his guard and provoke him into betraying himself."

"So, this is the young lady who did all that eavesdropping while we were at breakfast!" put in McClue, who had stepped up unnoticed.

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"I saw her—just after it was too late. I'm afraid we'll have to take her into partnership."

"I wonder how much eavesdropping you've been doing yourself," retorted Minnie.

"You—you weren't listening to what she said to me at breakfast?" faltered Clara, turning red.

"No, but I see now that I should have been. What was she saying?"

"I said just what Chief Bollar said last night," Minnie flashed back, "—that you were a perfectly wonderful detective to see crimes before they happened. But what's the use of trying to keep us cheerful? Isn't Bollar really after Darehurst?"

"It looks as if he might be. Do you think it's to be regretted?"

"Don't you see that it will kill Philippa? She doesn't care about herself, because she knows she is innocent. But if they arrest Darehurst it will kill her."

"You don't think, then, that she is quite so certain that he—"

"Say, Mr. Ferret— Oh, I've heard of you! —you certainly *are* smart. I—"

But Bollar, turning from Darehurst, had made a sign to one of his men—who now caught Philippa firmly by the wrist. Darehurst was on the fellow instantly, and flung him so far that

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he rolled over and over on the grass and brought up with a crash against a tree.

"If anybody touches her again, I'll strangle him!" he shouted.

Then, as if suddenly becoming a different man, he quietly held out his hands with the wrists suggestively pressed together.

"Enough of this nonsense. I killed Estamps, and am ready to take the consequences."

"I thought you'd soon see it in that light," said Bollar, with the grin of a successful strategist, forcing the handcuffs home with a click. "Come on back to where it happened, and tell us all about it."

Philippa sank to the ground and was carried into the house without having uttered another word. Darehurst stood and watched her go, a look of unutterable sadness and unutterable pride showing in his face.

"Is there anything else you have noticed—Minnie's your name isn't it?—anything besides the apparent fact that Philippa isn't sure of Darehurst's innocence?" McClue asked the question after the others had gone, leaving him and his two companions in sole possession of the spot.

But it was Clara who answered: "It seemed to me, somehow, that he wasn't quite certain of hers."

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McClue nodded.

"I got the same impression. And, of course, if both apparent facts are true, it follows that neither one is guilty, and we're left without a suspect."

"I don't want a suspect!" cried Clara, for a moment forgetful of her profession. "What is it, Minnie?"

For Minnie Deyo was staring before her like one who neither sees nor hears.

"This is the third time that Philippa has fainted," she murmured finally. "What if—oh, my God!"

CHAPTER VII

GATHERING DANGERS

McCLUE found Darehurst sitting on the bench in the fatal tower-room, vigilantly guarded by one of Bollar's lieutenants.

"The Chief has forbidden anyone to go near him for the present," said Matthew Farlow, stepping in from the balcony and leading the detective by the elbow in the direction of the opposite corridor.

"Then he hasn't made his confession yet—in detail?"

"No; the Chief was called away. And in the meantime you and I—"

"Oh! You want to know who sent me here."

"You were sent, of course, by the owner of Ivy Towers."

"And who is he?"

"I assure you," said Farlow, sitting down in the alcove seat and motioning the other to follow his example; "I assure you I am as ignorant of his identity as you can possibly be—assuming that you *are* ignorant. It is his money which

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backs the Superba Film Corporation, of which I am the nominal head. Beyond that, I am completely in the dark. The funds reach me indirectly."

"In that case we can't give each other much help." The Ferret eyed his companion sideways, and wondered if he could be telling the truth. Farlow's expression betrayed a similar thought, but it was well cloaked with amiability as he went on:

"We can at least avoid working at cross-purposes. Neither of us has much confidence in Bollar, I believe. And as I am forced to go away for a day or two, you are in a position to do me a great favor."

"You are going away?" repeated McClue, finding some difficulty in making his voice sound casual.

"Yes, on some business connected with the finances of the firm—that is, if Bollar offers no objections. And I would like you to take my place and act as head of the house in my absence. Miss Bell is indisposed; the house-keeper has enough to do in managing the servants. In charge you might be able to save Philippa some annoyance. And wouldn't you like more comfortable quarters than that shake-down which Lounsbury has given you?"

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McClue, while yielding cautiously to Farlow's friendliness, which seemed genuine, insisted that the shake-down was quite palatial—that he was interested in Lounsbury's chemical messes and liked to be near them.

“At least let me give you a special servant, then. I've thought of Yen Hui—if you don't object to an oriental. He is very capable and faithful, and will see that any suggestions you make are carried out. I can't control Bollar, but everybody else I am going to place under your authority—if you won't mind the trouble for a day or two.”

Whereupon Yen Hui, as if he had the happy faculty of materializing whenever and wherever he was wanted, suddenly stood before them, dressed in a black silk skull-cap, heelless slippers, light blue pantaloons tied tightly about the ankles and revealing several inches of spotless white sock, and a big-sleeved garment of the dressing-sack order of priceless yellow silk covered with many-hued embroidery. His face was as placid as the map of China, and of about the same tint as the one in which that same map usually appears in an American school geography. He listened to Farlow's instructions without a word, and when that worthy took his leave remained standing before his new master

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like an automaton waiting for someone to pull its string.

McClue, reviewing rapidly all that Farlow had just said, was forced to admit that no detective had ever been given a more complete *carte blanche*. That the director of the *Superba* was going to the city to attend to routine affairs seemed doubtful. More likely, in spite of his pretense of ignorance, he was seeking a conference with "Anxious." Moreover, to be left in charge might mean to be kept busy with unimportant matters, and a special servant might be only another name for a spy. Yet Farlow was questionably shocked by recent occurrences. His slightly artificial pompousness had disappeared before a genuine anxiety, much improving the impression which he made. McClue decided to make the most of the opportunity offered and to reserve his ultimate conclusions for a later time. Then he turned his thoughts to the Chinaman, and was suddenly reminded of something.

"Sit down here beside me, Yen Hui, and act human," he said. "I want to ask you—the Chow dog is a Chinese breed, isn't it?"

"Him Chinese, yes," replied the oriental, remaining standing.

"Well, I thought I saw one around here yes-

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terday. He looked sick. Whom does he belong to?"

"That Chau-Chau. Him belong to me."

"That so? How is he this morning? Looked to me like a pretty sick dog."

"Him dead!" For an instant there flashed from the passive face such a look of passion and hatred that McClue felt as if he had seen the mantle of slag ripped from the crater of a volcano. But the look was gone so soon that one could hardly be certain of having observed it, and to all subsequent inquiries Yen Hui gave only politely indifferent answers, saying, when the possibility of poison was hinted at:

"Not say poison. Chau-Chau, him have velly bad stomach. Eat somet'ing bad, mebbe—disagree—him get chill—so die. No mlatteh. Plenty dog."

The detective had to give it up, and resolved—taking a chance on Bollar's arriving to examine Darehurst in his absence—to go for another short trip about the house while fresh clues were yet to be found. The confession would be a matter of record, and he could certainly manage to get a look at it afterwards; while clues—should Darehurst's story prove to be as unconvincing as he anticipated—clues needed attention before their meaning became undecipherable.

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Leaving Yen Hui behind, the Ferret directed his steps towards the wall where Clara had seen a man escaping the night before. And sure enough there was a rope, knotted at intervals to facilitate climbing, its upper end held firmly by a grappling hook caught in a small tree growing just outside.

"She wasn't dreaming after all," he mused. "Somebody from without was certainly mixed up in whatever happened within. And yet nothing has been reported stolen, unless we count Philippa's diamond ring—and not even that was taken away."

Going back to the house, he found the day's wash just being collected in the kitchen, and immediately noticed a towel (of the sort that is made to be suspended from a roller) which was already as wet as if it were just from the tub.

"Where did you get this?" he asked the girl who was throwing it into a basket.

"From the laundry, sir," she answered.

"Was it as wet as that the last time you saw it?"

"No, sir. It was dry yesterday. But I found it thrown into a corner of one of the stationary tubs. That is how it probably got wet, sir."

"No doubt that's *where* it got wet," said

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McClue to himself. "It looks to me as if somebody found it necessary to wash his hands in a hurry last night, and to wash the towel immediately afterwards. Did a good job, too. There's no use in trying to find out anything by analysis."

McClue slipped a bill into the hand of the astonished servant, with the admonition that if she wanted to prosper she would better forget the incident.

"And now you might just show me where this stationary washtub in the laundry is," he added.

"I dassn't. We might meet Mrs. Childs—the housekeeper, sir."

"Hm! She's a strict one, eh?"

"Yes, sir. She'd scold me terribly if she caught me talkin' with you here. But it would cost me my place if I was saw with you down in the laundry."

Ivy Towers, though seemingly built upon a hilltop, was in reality slightly to one side of it, so that in places the grounds were on a level nearly with the main floor, and in others sloped sharply away, giving an opportunity for a well-lighted basement story for the kitchens and second dining-room. The laundry was beneath in a lonely cellar, and as he listened to the girl's directions for reaching it he smilingly admitted that Mrs. Childs was justified in assigning moral

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differences to tête-à-têtes on the different levels.

The tubs, he discovered to his disappointment, were already nearly filled with dirty linen that had been put to soak, rendering further examination futile. But the cellar seemed worthy of exploration on its own account. A labyrinth of arches and pillars, it was more like a crypt than a cellar, and suggested the underground regions of old donjons and keeps. Its uses, however, were modern enough. There was the neatly bricked-off furnace-room, for example; a tomb-like subcellar beneath it into which the ashes were dumped, and a long passage or tunnel through which, doubtless, they were carted away.

As the ray of the detective's pocket flash-light fell upon the ash-heap, he seemed suddenly to be reminded of what he had come for. Heedless of his clothes, he began pawing about among the ashes, and at the end of three or four minutes came upon a sliver of bone some two inches long and half an inch wide. Cut into one of its edges was a perfect semicircle, its diameter about equal to that of a lead pencil.

He had put the sliver into his pocket and was looking for further finds in the ashes, when the flash-light was snatched from his hand. Darkness, absolute and total, descended so suddenly that the very building seemed to be crashing

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down. And as if that were not enough, his startled senses made him aware of the closing and bolting of the ash-room at his back.

There was no way of escape now unless it was through the tunnel, towards which he hurriedly felt his way. But after falling several times over heaps of rubbish and bringing up against a wooden barrier at the tunnel's end almost as solid as the masonry itself, he was aware of some heavy object falling with a loud splintering sound at his feet. It was roughly spherical, he discovered by feeling of it, and appeared to weigh about a hundred pounds. A lump of coal! And it must have fallen through some unguessed aperture in the wall overhead. Had he been another step in advance, it would have crushed him.

Retreating towards the barrier, McClue unlimbered his automatic and began to fire at the floor, with a listening-interval between each shot. At the sixth the barrier swung open, and, turning, he saw a square of blessed outdoor light cut into the darkness.

"Don't shoot any more, please," said a woman's voice. "Come out. I am behind the door."

"Who are you?" questioned the Ferret, still grasping his weapon.

"Mrs. Childs," the voice went on. "I heard

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you firing and knew that someone had locked you in."

At this she emerged into view, and, as McClue stepped out, quietly locked the tunnel-entrance behind him. She proved to be a tall, gaunt creature, neatly dressed in black, with a Puritanical cast of countenance indicative of birth and breeding rather above her present position. Judging from the swiftness and sureness of her movements, she was not yet old enough to be termed middle-aged. But her face might have been of any age whatever. There was something tragic about it and about her dark, deep-sunken eyes—as though she had passed through some terrible experience, mental or physical. Such faces are common among those suffering from lingering diseases, and those whose consciences magnify the ordinary impulses of the flesh into the appearance of fiendish and terrible sins.

McClue was conscious of instant respect and pity for Mrs. Childs.

"Sorry I frightened you," he declared; "but I was looking around in the furnace-room when the door blew to. I guess it must lock with a spring, for I couldn't get it open. So I began firing in hopes of bringing assistance."

"If you thought the door blew to and fastened itself you were mistaken," said Mrs. Childs.

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"It fastens with a bolt. Probably one of the kitchen maids played a prank on you—or it may have been one of the actor-people. Come and let me brush you off."

He accompanied the housekeeper to a room where she found a whisk broom and swiftly rendered him presentable. Nothing was said about the lump of coal, but as he made his way to where Darehurst was waiting to complete his confession of murder he had by no means forgotten it.

"If he says he did it all himself, and that everybody else in this house is innocent, his true name must be Ananias," the detective muttered, giving a final adjustment to his tie and hoping that the recent disorder of his toilet had been sufficiently repaired to escape attention.

But Bollar had not returned, and the guard still held Darehurst *incommunicado*. McClue slipped into the card-room, found some stationary, and proceeded to write two letters. Into the envelope of the first he put the sliver of bone, the search for which had so nearly cost him his life. The second letter purported to be an advertisement, and read:

"For Sale—second-hand motion-picture projecting outfit at a price which will prove cheap to anyone having use for a first-class machine."

It was the signal prescribed by the unknown

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"Anxious," to be used by the detective when he was ready to have his preliminary report called for at his office. Having signed it with his initials, he addressed it to a leading journal and enclosed a bill to pay for the insertion. The other envelope he addressed to himself in New York.

He was now about to leave, when he noticed an old-fashioned motion-picture camera standing near the wall upon an enormously tall tripod, and beside the tripod a spiral iron stair leading to the floor above. Mounting a few steps, he found himself looking through a small aperture—apparently a ventilator from which the grating had been removed—into the room where Darehurst and the policeman were sitting. There was afforded a view of the window, a portion of the floor, and the head of the staircase where Estamps had met his death. A glance at the camera showed that, thrust a little forward, it would command the same scene.

McClue touched the crank-handle, and whistled softly to himself. He remembered the clicking sound he had heard the night before while the panchromas were blazing. Did the camera account for it? No; the clicks had come too slowly. This slowness, he now realized, was that puzzling modification of a familiar noise

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of which he had spoken to Clara. And yet—supposing a picture *had* been taken while those lights were on!

“It can’t have caught the murder. That was done in the dark. But it may have snapped up something later,” he muttered as he opened the black box and looked for the reel of film. But the box was empty. Either there had been no film, or it had since been removed.

He went to drop his letters in the mail-box, and was fortunate enough to encounter the post-man just leaving the house. But he couldn’t keep his mind off the camera. If a film *had* been exposed and removed, there was possibly a bit of evidence in the hands of somebody that somebody else would go to almost any lengths to possess.

When he returned to the card-room Chief Bollar, an ink-pad in one hand, a small squeegee roller in the other, stood arguing angrily with the man he had set as guard over Darehurst.

“Here’s a police officer,” cried Bollar “who don’t know how to take a set of finger-prints even after I’ve brought him the tools!”

“Perhaps I can help you,” McClue suggested, guessing at once the other’s unwillingness to show his own ignorance in the art.

“Go ahead—you ought to be good at these little jobs. I’ve got to instruct my men if we’re

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goin' to have murder as a steady diet around here after this."

The Ferret suppressed a smile, spread a sheet of blank paper out on the table, passed the roller a couple of times over the ink-pad, and turned to Darehurst.

"Any objection to being made a little mussy?"

"None whatever."

And without a ripple appearing in the dull indifference which had settled down upon him, the self-accused permitted the palm, the front surface of his fingers and the finger-tips of his right hand to be thoroughly inked. Then he pressed the hand flat down upon the paper while McClue drew the outlines with a lead pencil, thus completing a picture in black and white with every line and wrinkle showing in sharp relief.

When the prisoner retired with the officer to clean up, Bollar produced a photograph and a lens from his pocket, and proceeded to compare the photograph with the impression just made.

"Maybe you'd like to give us your valuable opinion," he remarked at length, trying to hide his confusion under an elaborate show of sarcasm.

"If you mean, are the two impressions of the same hand," said the detective after a moment's examination, "my opinion is—yes, un-

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doubtedly. Of course we have taken a 'flat' and not a 'rolled' print, but the photograph is also of a practically flat impression. Look at the thumb. It is a *tented arch* in both cases. Then we have a good reproduction of the ball of the forefinger—showing a *whorl* with two *deltas*. There is absolutely no doubt about it. Both impressions are the same."

"Then for once I'm willing to agree with you. A sharp down at headquarters took this photo from the marks we found on the sword-handle. I never like to listen to no confession without I have an independent line on the facts."

"It shows your good common-sense," flattered the Ferret.

And then, the others having by this time returned, Bollar began:

"Now, Darehurst, tell us just how you murdered Jean Estamps—and why."

"My motive," Darehurst responded, "was self-defense. I had been out in front for a little air, and as I was coming in I thought I heard somebody prowling about near my room. I could see nothing, but later I heard it again, and picked up the sword that I had been wearing as Hamlet—"

"You picked up the sword I found near the body?"

"Yes, Chief. And I thought I caught a

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glimpse of a man ahead of me. But I lost him in the dark. Soon afterwards I heard something tinkle down the stairs, so I came on here and found Estamps—”

“Where?”

“In the tower-room right next to where we’re sitting now. He seemed to be waiting for me, and when I saw who it was—for it was pretty dark—I called his name. We began almost immediately to quarrel—about the card game and various other matters. He evidently wanted to pick a fight. Finally he drew a dagger—it was a part of his costume, you know—and I drove him back towards the stairs. There he suddenly ducked under my guard, caught hold of the sword-hilt and wrenched it out of my hand.”

“He was holding the dagger in his right hand?” asked McClue.

“Yes.”

“And with his left hand wrenched the sword from your right?”

“That’s the way it happened,” Darehurst doggedly persisted. “It’s a cross-hilt sword, not giving one a very firm grip, and I wasn’t looking for any such move. Besides, he was prodigiously strong. So I drew a revolver and fired.”

“You *fired?*” cried Bollar.

“Exactly.”

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"And what did you do with the revolver?" demanded McClue.

"I went and threw it into the Sound."

"Then you must have climbed the wall, as the gates were all shut. Did you have anything to help you?"

"No, I should hope I could climb a wall without any help."

"Don't bother askin' him how he climbed it," put in Bollar impatiently. "He didn't climb nothin', and there wasn't any revolver, and he didn't fire. What are you lying for, Darehurst? Don't we know that Estamps was killed by having his head smashed in with the sword—that, and his fallin' down stairs backwards? A revolver don't help your self-defense. It's ridiculous. Don't you think I'd have found a bullet?"

"You—you didn't find a bullet in the body?" There was a flash that looked like incredulous joy in Darehurst's eyes, but only McClue saw it. Bollar went on:

"Of course I didn't. There wan't none to find. But I'd like to know what you done with that dagger—if he really had one. There was a sheath on his belt, but no dagger. What became of it?"

"No dagger?" Darehurst seemed to be taken back, but he rapidly recovered himself. "Then I must have taken it and thrown it into the

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Sound with the revolver, though I don't remember it. You see, I was very much excited—it's all rather a blur."

"What do you think of that for a confession?" asked Bollar, leading McClue aside.

"A lie, mostly, from beginning to end."

"Well, sir, dude detective or not, again I'll have to agree with you. That dagger is too fishy—and I can't figure out why he put in that romance about a fire-arm."

"It's absurd the way he tells it," the Ferret assented. "If anybody climbed over the wall to the Sound last night he had a rope and a grappling-iron to help him. There's no other way of managing it."

"Of course! Nobody got over the wall."

"And the photograph of the finger-prints on the sword-hilt is clear and distinct. There are no indications that the weapon was wrenched away from him as he says it was."

"Oh, we know he ain't tellin' the truth. What worries me is—why ain't he? After volunteering a confession, why does he hand out this cock and bull yarn? I expected him to dress it up to suit himself, of course. But why put in details that hurt? And why not have made it a little reasonable? Mustn't he have known we didn't find no bullet?"

"The fact that no bullet was found, Chief,

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hardly seems to me conclusive that none was fired."

"What?"

"He says he shot the man," continued McClue. "As you have just remarked, why should he volunteer a confession, and then tell a story which he knew could be proven false? If he says there was a bullet, isn't it likely that there *was* a bullet—but a bullet with curious properties which he failed to reckon on—as for example, a capacity of disappearing and not leaving any hole behind it?"

"You think this is a time for a joke, do you?"

"I'm not joking."

"Then, if you've stumbled on any information that you're keepin' back, I demand to know it—in the name of the law."

"No, I haven't stumbled on anything but what you must have stumbled on yourself—if you've been going in the right direction—unless it's a snuff-box that I found last night before you came."

"I don't mean snuff-boxes nor any folderol. I mean anything important. Even you are sort of an officer. You ought to be willin' to *corporate* with them that's in charge."

"Think so?" drawled McClue, pausing to light a cigarette. "Only last night you said something about my being a divorce detective,

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I thought. You oughtn't to expect much co-operation from a man in that business."

"I guess you've got me there, partner. I oughtn't to have said it—only I was a bit riled, you know. Now, if you've got any dope about—"

"I've got this." McClue took from his vest pocket the pellet of lead which he had showed Clara at breakfast, and let it roll about in his palm. "Here's the bullet that Darehurst was talking about. It was fired from somewhere near the head of the stairs, and went through the face of the clock that's fixed against the wall about half way down the flight. I found it back of the works this morning. They were stopped at exactly 1:55, and I left them that way—wonder you didn't notice it."

Bollar rushed to the stairway, McClue following more slowly at his heels. There was the clock, ticking quietly and keeping perfect time, its face unmarred by so much as a scratch.

"I guess you must have dreamed that one," said the Chief of Police, roaring with laughter.

McClue, who had stiffened like one whose eyes are seeing visions, gradually came back to his surroundings.

"I swear, Chief, I told you the truth. I couldn't have dreamed the bullet, could I?"

"What's it all mean, then?"

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"It means that somebody besides ourselves is hard at work here."

"Who? Philippa Bell? I hate to think she done the actual killing. But there's that petal—nobody has explained that yet. Damn me if I know just *what* to do. It won't do to make no mistake and arrest the wrong party—not in this town."

Had it not been for that burst of laughter which was still rankling in the Ferret's mind, there might have been a complete reconciliation between the two representatives of law and order. But the laughter had been too hearty to be so easily forgotten, and McClue, omitting all mention of the grapple and several other yet more important matters, contented himself with suggesting:

"Why make any arrest just yet? Turn Darehurst loose and keep your eye on him. Something is sure to happen soon to tip you off to the truth."

Bollar grasped at the idea as a man out of his depth in water grasps at a plank, and went to inform Darehurst that he was free. But McClue stayed where he was and continued staring at the clock. *There* was a mystery which he must solve at once.

CHAPTER VIII

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CLARA spent the morning in Philippa's apartment. She had gone there to give what consolation she could. But her beautiful hostess, for all her gentle appearance, seemed to be possessed of an iron will, and—the first shock of Darehurst's arrest once over—firmly dismissed all indications either of gloom or agitation. She even found an embroidery-frame with a half-finished piece of work upon it, and engaged her guest in the cheerful, old-fashioned occupation of learning a new stitch. One would have thought that she was entertaining a life-long friend and had not a care in the world.

"I feel sure he is innocent," she remarked, as if noting Clara's wonder; "so sure that, even though he is making a confession, I know nobody will believe him."

But Clara's wonder mounted higher than ever when a note came from McClue showing that nobody *had* believed. Was Philippa really so confident of her lover that she could imagine

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nobody even dreaming of his guilt? Or had she foreseen that he would trip up when he tried to fit known facts to his pretended culpability? What known facts? Known to whom?

Clara read the note aloud, whereupon Philippa, instead of showing signs of relief, began to be irritable. Perhaps she had been like a sea, kept calm by the very fierceness of the gale which blew above it—a sea which tosses and tumbles only after the weather mends. Perhaps there was something cynical at the bottom of her behavior, a conviction that he had not tried to tell a credible story. Anyway, a mislaid glove brought Rosalie in for quite a torrent of scolding, followed by an equally tempestuous apology. Minnie Deyo's name happened to be mentioned. Philippa turned to Clara with an expression of renewed vexation.

“Why didn't you mention her before? I hear she's your particular friend. You might have known that I'd want to show her some attention on your account. Send for her at once, Rosalie, and we'll all have luncheon here together.”

It sounded far-fetched. And when Minnie came, and sat there too delighted to eat, there was something disturbing in the feverish way Philippa gulped down cup after cup of coffee, explaining that she had a dreadful headache and

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that strong coffee sometimes had an almost miraculously soothing effect.

"It hasn't today, though," she added. "I might as well drink water. And tonight I won't sleep. Last night I had bad dreams. I thought I was adrift on an ocean as red—as red as when you cut your finger. You remember my saying that I'd seen a horrible sight? That was what I meant. I wasn't quite awake yet. You believe me, don't you, Clara? It must have sounded strange. But you don't think—?"

Clara hastened to say that it was impossible for anybody to think anything of her but what was sweet and good. Philippa embraced her, and for a few moments, in spite of untoward events, an almost idyllic atmosphere took possession of the apartment. Then Philippa started.

"You're looking at that ring-mark which Mr. Bollar thought he discovered on my finger. It isn't a ring-mark. I've got into the habit of wrapping the thread around that finger when I embroider. But I didn't dare tell *him* that. He would have thought I was making it up. I doubt if it would be possible to convince him that there are women who do fancy work nowadays."

Clara dropped her eyes. She knew that Philippa was not in the habit of wrapping the

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thread about her ring-finger. It must have been marked in some other way—some way which she was anxious to keep a secret.

Farlow called, and after some appropriate remarks about Darehurst's liberation, announced that he had received permission from Chief Bollar to spend several days in New York. He was particularly nice to Clara, whom he insisted on keeping in the room. But when he rose to go Philippa followed him out into her private hall and closed the door behind her.

There was a ventilator in the wall, and she was heard to exclaim:

"How *can* you go and leave me! You know I cannot get along now without—without help. And if you go this way I won't have *any*."

"Really," said Farlow gently, "it is time that you tried to stand alone. I am worried about you."

"Time to stand alone—now? Impossible! I should rave. Later, I'll try—I promise you I shall try. And I'll succeed, of course. It is nothing. But now!"

"Yes, I suppose you're right. And I may as well tell you, Philippa, that is one of the principal reasons for my trip."

"You need to get—?"

"Yes."

"Then you'll be back very soon?"

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"As soon as possible. But it may be two days. There have been difficulties of late."

"Two days! But there—hurry along. I shall manage. I'll shut myself up with Rosalie."

Philippa fairly reeled as she came back into the room, and letting herself drop on a sofa she moaned softly as if forgetful that she was not alone:

"He is a good man. He is worried. But oh, how wretched I am! I don't understand myself. I can't be as bad as I think."

Clara, upon whom every word of this cryptic conversation had inflicted a distinct and separate pang, pretended to have heard nothing; and Minnie, with the true instinct of a natural born nurse, created a diversion by taking down Philippa's hair and beginning to rub her temples. A look of hatred, jealousy and suspicion stole into the eyes of Rosalie as she came in with the servant who was to remove the dishes. Had one been giving too little attention to the maid's possible rôle in that household? Evidently she was fanatically devoted to her mistress and would go to great lengths in her defense. Yet why should Philippa need defending? What had she done? From what was she suffering? What caused these wild inconsistencies in her manner?

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Such questions were still unanswered when McClue was announced.

"*You* here?" he exclaimed, as Clara stepped into the adjoining boudoir to receive him. "I was looking for Philippa Bell. No, don't go. Since we're together we might as well compare a few notes. Have you found out anything?"

"Nothing definite," said Clara, doubtfully, sitting down on the edge of a chair. "That glove you found turns out to be one of my own."

"It doesn't matter. Bollar has let me look at the sword, and we found—or rather I did—that it has not only Darehurst's finger-prints on it, but—look!"

He showed her some almost invisible bits of leather which he had collected in an envelope.

"You see they're white on one side, where they are torn off. But the outside surface is black. So it's a black and not a tan glove which we must look for. Traces of a bare hand and of a glove on the same weapon—that seems mighty interesting to me."

Clara nodded, but said nothing. She had been about to mention that Philippa had lost a glove, but something stopped her. It wasn't that she was afraid McClue would jump to the conclusion that Philippa was guilty. And certainly it couldn't be that she feared he wouldn't. But since that look of surprise, not to say dis-

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appointment, which she had caught on his face, her thoughts had been painfully bewildered, and she didn't want it to appear that *she* was anxious to connect Philippa with any crime.

"There's another thing," McClue went on. "That clock which was stopped by the bullet has been taken away and another clock just like it put in its place. I asked Mrs. Childs, the housekeeper, if there was a duplicate in the house, and she said she never heard of any. Isn't that a facer?"

Clara again assented, but she was thinking of the conversation she had just overheard between Philippa and Matthew Farlow, and debating with herself whether she should report it or not. She had arrived at the conclusion that she would have to repeat it as a clear matter of duty, when Philippa entered.

She had changed her dress, and looked like one of those sweet maids of the quaint old Puritan days just stepped out of some carefully treasured print. She even diffused a faint whiff of lavender, and no emotion stronger than a pretty fancy seemed ever to have registered itself in her face.

McClue jumped to his feet, and was visibly pleased.

"I came to assure you that I am here in your interests," he told her. "Don't be afraid that

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any more bungling mistakes are going to be made. Chief Bollar is as certain as I am that Mr. Darehurst, when he said he was going to confess, was acting under some momentary hallucination. One of the policemen misunderstood a signal, and presumed to lay his hand on you—that is what caused the whole trouble.”

“Alex thought I was going to be sent to jail—the poor boy,” Philippa responded easily. “But I’m glad you are here, whoever sent you. I confess I was somewhat worried over Mr. Bollar’s capacity for making blunders. It would be quite intolerable if he went any further in accusing me or my friends of complicity in this affair. I don’t suppose you want to reveal—the name of your prophetic client?”

“I fancy he is the owner of Ivy Towers,” said McClue, looking his admiration for this marvelously self-possessed woman, who sat and chatted as if he were a chance caller, and managed to keep all signs of tension from her manner even when asking leading questions.

“I have often wondered who owned this place,” she remarked.

“Frankly, I’m quite in the dark about him,” the detective insisted, “and have no idea what sort of trouble it was which he anticipated. It couldn’t have had any connection with what has actually happened.”

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"And you haven't any theory—about *that?*"

"Oh, a detective always has theories. There is a letter on its way to New York this minute which contains a certain person's name and the outline of a few things I have discovered. I'd like to have it known that I have sent such a letter. With this evidence out of harm's way, it's less likely that any interested party will be tempted—well, to interfere."

"I had hoped it would turn out to be—what you call an outside job," said Philippa, her tone heavy with sudden weariness.

"Don't give up hoping that the worst of it was," the Ferret hastened to reassure her. "I don't mind telling you that an outsider was certainly in the house last night, and we may hear more from him before we are through."

This ended the interview, save that when Clara, in response to a signal, accompanied him to the door, he whispered:

"Try to get the finger-prints of every woman in the house. That candle was pinched out as you guessed, and the prints will tell who did it. I shouldn't wonder if it turned out to be important."

The only other caller that afternoon was Bol-
lar, who came to tell Philippa that Darehurst was completely eliminated. She forced him to stay and take a cup of tea, and exerted her-

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self to convince him that none of his indiscretions up to the present moment had awakened rancor in high places. Clara noticed that the Chief followed McClue's ingenious statement that the policeman in seizing Philippa's wrist had acted without authority. It looked as if he had been made a present of the subterfuge. And she tried in vain not to see that Philippa was winding yet another man around her finger.

Clara wanted to escape, but was forced to yield to entreaties. Minnie also began to show signs of restlessness; and after Bollar, reeking with self-satisfied smiles, took his departure, she asked Philippa directly if she would not like to be left alone.

"I don't care whether you go or stay!" was the unexpected response. "Rather than have you and Clara sit here, watching me as if I were a—oh, Minnie, Minnie *dear!* I don't know what I am saying. Forgive me. Of course I don't want you to go. That is, if you can possibly stay and put up with me. Don't you see that I am completely unstrung? But I won't give way again."

And, as if determined to dissipate the last remnants of the cloud which hung over them all, she snatched a bunch of roses from a vase, twisted them skillfully into a wreath, put a record in a victrola which stood in a corner, and

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danced a long and elaborate *pas seul* with all the grace in the world. Then she insisted on the girls learning the step, and finally sat down between them on the lounge and begged them to talk to her, even drawing Clara's head down upon her shoulder.

"Tell us a story, Minnie—something cheerful," she cried.

Then, almost in the same breath:

"A wreath—I am wearing a wreath! What am I thinking of!"

She jumped up, a look of repugnance, almost of terror, in her face, and stood suddenly still. Several sharp chords had been struck upon a piano somewhere in a neighboring part of the building, their peculiarly wierd harmony floating in through the open windows like the notes of so many ill-omened birds.

Philippa relaxed, laid the wreath of roses quietly on the table, and remarked in a tone of indifference:

"I think I'll go for a little walk. Will you wait here, both of you? I won't be gone long, and I want you to take dinner with me—here in my rooms. I'll invite some of the gentlemen, and we'll try to forget our troubles."

She reached the door as she spoke, and had shut it behind her before they could answer.

An icy chill crept through Clara's veins. She

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had stooped to pick up her handkerchief, and a petal from the rose wreath, which had become entangled in her hair while her head was resting on Philippa's shoulder, dropped to the floor. She knew now how—say a primrose petal might be transferred from the wearer to another and be left wherever that other might go!

Yet she felt relieved. Philippa seemed completely exonerated. It was Minnie who reminded her how little the rose leaf improved the situation.

"Of course," said Minnie, "if the *primrose* leaf did that—fell out of her wreath upon somebody's head—Darehurst must be the man. She isn't the kind to let *anybody* put their head on her shoulder, and before you came there wasn't any *woman* she was chummy with."

"Better suspect Darehurst than Philippa."

"Would you think so, Clara, if you were accused and he was the man you loved?"

"But I don't believe Darehurst did it."

"I know you don't. The rose leaf only shows how the petal *might* have got on the body, not how it *did* get there. We're exaggerating its importance because we're afraid that Philippa—"

"You mean—you distrust her?"

"We both distrust her," Minnie declared, planting herself squarely before her friend.

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"Do you mean to say it hasn't occurred to you that her keeping us beside her all day is to prevent our wandering around and possibly discovering something? She knows who has eyes in their heads. And hasn't she been soft-soldering the men until they are deaf, dumb and blind, so that they couldn't see a piece of evidence against her if it was as big as an elephant?"

"You are detestable!" gasped Clara. "And you pretend to love her."

"I'm not detestable, and I don't pretend to love her. There's no pretend about it. Only we might as well face the truth if we're going to help. She may be worried about Darehurst, but that isn't all. And there are others besides ourselves who will have to be satisfied."

"That's so, Minnie." Clara sat down, but continued staring at the floor. "And of course I didn't mean what I said. The only way we can really help her is to believe in her. There are some things which *can't* be true, no matter what the evidence is."

Minnie flung her arms impulsively about Clara's neck.

"I didn't know that a detective could be wise enough to see that. I thought you had to go to reform school—and have been born in Cherry street. Let's admit, then, that those chords

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struck somewhere on a piano just now were a signal, and that she has gone to answer it."

"But I'm not certain—"

"I am. I've heard something like it before. It's Darehurst. He has several different things which he plays that way, and then breaks off. Each one has a meaning—different places to meet, I think. It's awful to say so, but they have a regular system of telegraphing—by music."

"We must get to the bottom of everything," said Clara, moving towards the door with sudden determination.

"Then you're going to tell Mr. McClue that Philippa has lost a glove—a black one, just like the bits that were scraped off on the jewel-work of the sword?"

"How do you know that—?"

"I listened while he was telling you in the other room. Philippa wanted me to listen, though she didn't say so. And she seemed relieved when I said it didn't sound interesting—and pretended to scold me."

"Then—*you* tell him, Minnie, about the glove. I don't believe it will hurt her in the long run, but I'd rather not—"

"I see, Clara, dear. You'd rather have him think that somebody else was trying to convict her. You're jealous, and afraid to appear so."

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Clara looked up in astonishment, even alarm; but Minnie insisted:

"He *did* look surprised when he saw you here—almost as if he was disappointed at your not being her. But it was nothing. His mind was full of business. And afterwards, when he seemed to fall for everything she said, I don't believe he was being fooled much. He's deeper than you give him credit for. Anyway, you must get used to all the men making a fuss over Philippa. Why, even my Lounsbury once—"

Minnie paused, while her eyes snapped and her teeth came together as if over some painful recollection. Then she brightened, giving her companion's hand a terrific squeeze.

"There! I've hurt my little detective's feelings! But don't worry. Philippa never encourages anyone beyond a certain point—excepting Darehurst. And I don't believe she could get your Ferret away from you if she tried. It's too late."

"Minnie! Mr. McClue and I are the merest friends. He is nothing to me excepting a good employer."

"Is that so? All right, you tell him that. And now let's follow Philippa. That was a bit of Chopin we heard. I think it means the pergola leading to the conservatories."

Clara decided that it was useless to protest,

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and suffered herself to be literally dragged away. The pergola proved to be a secluded gallery, with frequent angles and woven about with growing things. A mosaic flooring overspread by a strip of rubber matting rendered approach noiseless, and there was soon to be seen the glimpse of a slender figure half hidden by a clump of tubed oleander trees near the farther end.

"The Ferret saw me listening," said Minnie under her breath. "It wasn't as if I had succeeded in putting anything over on him."

"Who is thinking about that!" returned Clara. "There is Philippa, and Darehurst, too, just as you predicted. But they'll see us if we go any closer."

"We won't have to, much. Do you notice that dome-like thing in the roof? All we need do is to get under it. This is a sort of whispering-gallery—and you've no idea the struggle I've had to keep from using it on them before this. I found it out by accident, and—but listen!"

Surely enough, when they had advanced a few feet to where another oleander clump usurped a bit of the footway, the conversation of the still-distant pair came to them with sudden distinctness.

"Can't you see they're only pretending to ex-

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onerate you?" Philippa was saying. "Bollar and McClue are both watching to get you off your guard—for you to make some move which can be used as evidence."

"If they want evidence," Darehurst came back, "I'm sure I tried to give them plenty."

The listeners crouched yet closer behind the oleanders. The colloquy went on:

"It was clever of you, Alex—making a confession that wouldn't hold water."

"I did as well as I could."

"Yes; but you can't shake off those men so easily—one of them, at least. That Ferret, as they call him, sees everything."

"I know he's dangerous. But what do you want me to do?"

"Escape."

"You want that?"

"Yes."

"But it's impossible."

"It's not impossible, dear. McClue can't watch everywhere at once. I can disguise you as one of Bollar's own policemen—in a uniform out of the property-room—and you can get away tonight."

"Very well, Philippa, if you wish it."

"Of course I wish it. You'll have time to reach a place of safety before anything is discovered. I'll make time for you. I'll—I'll tell

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them I did it. That will hold them off for a while."

"No!" Darehurst's voice echoed vehemently beneath the roof. "You mustn't do anything of the sort. It wouldn't be safe."

"How—not safe?"

"They might trip you up, and prove the truth."

"Don't be afraid." There was a trace now of scorn in the woman's tones. "I'll not tell them the truth, I promise you."

"It's agreed, then. I'll run away and draw those bloodhounds after me. And if you are called as a witness—they might indict me, even absent, you know—there is a way for you to avoid testifying."

"I'd forgotten that. But I wouldn't take it. The effect would be bad. No, no! You must let me have my way. I'll lead them on a false scent. I'm not stupid."

And as he said nothing, she dropped to her knees, caught his hands and kissed them, choking back the sobs as she went on:

"I love you, Alex! I'll come and join you, if it's ever safe. I'll do anything you say. But you must go. I can't bear to have you here, in danger every day, and eyes everywhere, watching, watching—no, I can't bear it."

"But if I go, Philippa, you mustn't attempt

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to soften the effect of my running away. You'd be certain to make matters worse. I'd be imagining all the while that I saw some policeman laying his hands on you again."

"I understand!" She still crouched at his feet, and now cuddled her cheek against his hands. "I understand! You are afraid for me. Forgive me for thinking for a moment that it was for yourself. You never have thought of yourself, Alex. And I have led you to destruction. If you only knew how unworthy I am—how I despise myself. I sometimes think that the very devil has taken hold of me. But if we could only find some other plan—one which wouldn't separate us."

Darehurst stooped down, kissed her, and lifted her to a place by his side.

"Life has promised us something, anyway," he murmured. "We must live for that—and for the happiness we have had."

"Yes, yes! We must live for that," said the woman.

"And I'm afraid there isn't any other plan," he continued. "It is terrible to think what a wretched thing has come between us. We mustn't think. And you mustn't try to follow me—not till I send you word. They would trace you."

"Have no fear. I won't write, or anything.

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I'll not even ask you where you are going. But—oh, it will kill me!"

She lowered her head, crying silently, while Darehurst glanced around as if realizing for the first time that they might be overheard. Clara and Minnie scarcely dared to breathe for fear that the whispering-gallery worked in both directions. Finally Philippa recovered her voice enough to moan:

"Alex, why did you do it? How could you?"

The effect was almost explosive. Darehurst jumped up, and, seizing the woman by the shoulders, roughly jerked her to a standing posture.

"This is too much!" he snarled, in a voice suddenly gone ferocious. "It isn't enough that I'm willing to save you, but you must try to brazen it out to my face! Do you think I'm a fool? Can't you see that your miserable story is safe with me without resorting to this disgraceful sham?"

"Do you know any miserable story about me, Alex?" She lifted her face to him, and no emotion save a transfiguring love could be seen by the watchers in her faultless features. "There is one, but do you know it? Or are you pretending to think that I murdered Jean Estamps?"

"I'm pretending to nothing, and I don't know anything about any other miserable story

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and don't care anything about it. Enough that I am aware of this one. I *know* you killed Estamps."

"This is horrible," murmured Philippa. "It is you who are resorting to shams now. I can't let you go without your confidence. And yet—if it is any easier for you—go on. I am weak. I have done wrong. It isn't for me to reproach anybody."

"Let's say no more about it, Philippa. I was a beast to lose my temper. We both murdered him in our hearts. I don't want to know your special reason."

He caught her in his arms, and for a long time the two stood in a silent embrace, as if endeavoring by the very force with which they drew together to make everything seem right between them—ignoring the gulf which no passionate clasp of arms could bridge.

Then he tore himself away and slipped into the conservatory, while Philippa started immediately for the house, passing right by the two who were watching, her unseeing eyes staring straight before her, her face perfectly white and expressionless.

"Each thinks the other guilty," breathed Clara, when she and Minnie were left alone. "That, at least, is plain."

"They both *say* so," the Mouse corrected.

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"We don't know what they *think*. So that proves nothing excepting that this is a beastly world. Look at the sunshine, the flowers and the grass—I hate it all."

"Anyway, we must prevent his going. I saw her whisper something just before he kissed her for the last time. It was probably where he would find his disguise without returning to the house."

"Tell McClue about it," suggested Minnie. "And now let's see if we can't get back to the room before Philippa."

They ran by a roundabout route; but it proved to have been an unnecessary exertion. Philippa did not appear until fully five minutes after they arrived, and then she passed at once into her bedroom, sending out word by the maid that she was ill and that the dinner they had planned to take together would have to be postponed. Minnie immediately left upon some errand of her own, and Clara started in search of McClue.

CHAPTER IX

MC CLUE FALLS

McCLUE had promised himself to solve the mystery of the substituted clock at once, but Mrs. Childs' unexpected denial of any knowledge of a duplicate warned him that he was proceeding too rapidly and without sufficient caution. And since then several other matters had claimed his attention. For one thing, there was the finding of a distinct impression of a thumb and finger on the candle which Clara had seen snuffed out in the upper tower-room. For another, there was the sword.

Fortunately he had not been satisfied with Bollar's photographs, and had induced the Chief to send to headquarters for the original weapon. The finding of shreds of black kid clinging to the facets of the jewel-work opened up an entirely new line of thought. Anybody who could grasp a sword by the jewel-work must either have been in a frantic state of mind, or else cool enough deliberately to preserve the finger-marks already on the smooth part of the

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hilt. In either case it made the question of gloves of paramount importance. That glove of Clara's which he had inadvertently picked up had not promised to be much of a clue even before he knew its owner. The glove he was looking for now might lead directly to the criminal. He had gone to Philippa's apartment meaning to question that young lady with all the cunning at his disposal, but her manner, in spite of the evidences of turmoil beneath her outward calm, had disarmed him. Besides, now that Clara knew of the matter, she would—he fondly imagined—report anything peculiar relating to Philippa's gloves.

So he came away empty handed, his attention once more bent upon time-pieces. A methodical investigation of the dining-room, corridors, the library and other places to which the entrée belonged to everybody, yielded nothing. But as he wandered back to the neighborhood of Philippa's suite he saw Darehurst emerge from a door on the other side of the public hall and hurry down stairs. An instant later, the Ferret was making his first survey of the athletic star's private quarters.

The rooms were elegantly furnished, but in a rugged, masculine fashion which immediately prepossessed one in favor of the occupant. There was a profusion of dumb-bells, foils, In-

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dian clubs, but—unless one counted a wall-safe—nothing unexpected or unusual. The walls, where not traversed by open beam-work, were covered with rough burlap of an agreeable shade and displayed a few good pictures, mostly of Western scenes.

But the burlap bore something besides pictures. There was one empty nail, or rather hook, and beneath it a small square space of a tint distinctly darker than its surroundings. Moreover, this slight discoloration continued to be discernible for some two or three feet farther towards the floor—a vague outline not quite to be called a shadow yet indicative of something which once had hung there—something which had retarded the fading process that the wall-covering had undergone wherever exposed to the full light of the windows. Beyond doubt here was the mark left by a clock, two long weights, and the human hands that had so often pulled them and down.

“Darehurst!” murmured the detective as he slipped away. “Of course it doesn’t prove that he moved the clock himself, but it would look mighty bad to a jury.”

He went back to the scene of the crime, and then to the balcony, over the rail of which Clara had seen the ladder drawn in. The rail was smooth and painted black—just the surface to

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show abrasions. But there were no abrasions. True, it had rained violently the night before, but it would have been impossible to drag the parallels of a ladder over that paint without leaving permanent scratches. Had Clara been suffering from hallucinations? The idea was preposterous. And to believe that material objects at Ivy Towers could be moved about in defiance to the ordinary laws of nature was altogether impossible.

Disconcerted, he reentered the card-room, where his attention was immediately attracted to the rugs. One of them—the smallest of all—did not quite match with the color-scheme of the others. Turned over, however, it matched perfectly. Turned over it also showed two faint streaks about eighteen inches apart. Beyond question the rug had been flung over the balcony before the ladder was put in place.

“Some brain hereabout has a devilish amount of forethought,” mused the Ferret. “I wonder what trace of it I’ll come upon next.”

He descended to the grounds and noticed that the Towers was equipped with the old-fashioned device now generally believed to be worse than useless—lightning-rods. No footprints were discernible, but about the base of the rod nearest the card-room window there was a small area of gravel the surface of which seemed to

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have been disturbed—scraped into tiny heaps. And, at a distance of about ten feet from the ground, one of the joints of the rod itself was missing!

“Fool!” muttered the detective, hurrying through the back grounds. “My own brains must be absolutely addled not to have thought of *that*—after Clara told me how long it was before she saw the man disappear.”

He brought up at the spot where the grapple had been found, and so certain had Bollar been that nobody had escaped in that direction that the rope still dangled unnoticed from the tree, its lower end within easy reach. McClue climbed up and looked over—just in time to see the back of a retreating policeman on guard outside. A policeman always *will* pace a beat if set to keep watch, notwithstanding the facilities thus afforded for things to happen in that direction towards which the part of his head not provided with eyes happens to be turned. The detective smiled, disengaged the rope, fastened the hook to the top of the wall, and let himself down. A skillful jerk was now sufficient to release the grapple, and—coiling the rope rapidly around his waist beneath his coat—he walked away across a stretch of sand towards the pleasantly murmuring shore of the Sound. By the

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time the policeman was making his return trip he was safely hidden behind a boat-house, and a few minutes later had reached the rear of a neighboring estate.

After that, it was an easy matter to gain the highway, where he hailed a passing automobile in charge of a lone chauffeur. A bit of currency was sufficient to convert the private vehicle into a public jitney. The detective climbed aboard.

"I suppose there is a hospital somewhere near," he said to the driver as they swept into the village.

"I'll take you there," was the good-natured response. And McClue soon found himself entering an edifice altogether too large and too well equipped not to be a memorial erected to the memory of some son or daughter of wealth, to whom hospitals and even money had ceased to be of further account.

"Have you any recent accident cases?" he asked of a pleasant-faced young woman at the visitor's desk.

"Fracture case came in early this morning."

"Fracture of what?"

"Compound fracture of the right tibia. But he seems to be only a tramp."

"Could I see him?" asked McClue, unctiously.

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"I'm only passing through town, but I always try to do a little work among the lowly and unfortunate wherever I go."

The young woman looked him over with a disdainful smile, which seemed to say, "Crank preacher, but perfectly harmless—might as well let him have his way." And she added aloud:

"I see no objection. But you won't find him very prepossessing. He says he fell trying to catch a freight train, and looks exactly like that sort of a person."

The patient lay in a bed at the end of an otherwise empty ward, and seemed to be asleep. And as soon as they were alone the Ferret took his lens from his pocket, picked up the hand that was lying outside the coverlet, and brought the finger-tips and glass firmly in contact. The supposed tramp sat up with a start.

"Hey, Doc, what're yeh doin' wit' my lunch-hooks?" he demanded.

"Just feeling of your pulse, that was all," said McClue, carefully wrapping the magnifying-glass in a sheet of the morning's newspaper which he had found beside the bed.

"Pulse nothin'! And say, you ain't the doc, after all. W'at's the game?"

"There is more than one physician in this hospital, my friend." The detective's eyes were

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scanning the remains of the paper, but it was a New York sheet and there was no sign that any news from Ivy Towers had yet reached it. "Any physician is better than a policeman—eh?"

"W'at's that?"

"You were hurt trying to steal a ride, you know, and they're rather hard on vagrants in this county. But I must be going. Nothing at all in the paper, I see. You'll find it dull out here in the country, I'm afraid. Good bye."

"Not much yeh don't say good bye, Professor—not yit. W'at's the lay, I asks yeh? An' w'at d'yeh mean by they's bein' nothin' in the paper?"

McClue had turned to go. Now, struck by a familiar intonation in the other's voice, he wheeled about.

"Why, if it isn't Chicago Mike! And here I've been wasting time getting your fingerprints."

"Come off! Yeh spotted me the first wink, Ferret—jist as I did you, or I wouldn't have drawn no spot-light on myself by startin' a argement. An' yeh ain't got nothin' on me, so yeh might as well say w'at's doin'. Yeh don't think—or hope—that I been leavin' my finger-marks behind me on no job, do yeh? Fergit it! An' give me a snipe."

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McClue tossed a package of cigarettes and a box of matches on the bed.

"I see you *feel* safe, Mike, or you wouldn't be so generous with the chin music. But it's too bad you slipped on the lightning-rod and broke your leg. The second story is pretty high at Ivy Towers, especially in the dark and when it's raining cats and dogs. The rod was in wretched condition, too—you might have got struck. Why didn't you go out by the kitchen window? There's where I was waiting for you."

The eyes of the man on the bed narrowed.

"Come ag'in!" he snapped. "I busted me runner tryin' to jump a beam, an' I don't know nothin' about no Ivy Towers nor lightnin'-rods."

"What were you looking in the paper for, then?"

"Politics. I always send out for one the first thing in the mornin'."

"All right, Mike. But I'd like to make a bargain with you. Don't tell anybody I've been here, and don't spill your real story to the police till I've seen you again. I needn't ask you not to run away—you can't."

"I'd make a bargain wit' you, Ferret, as soon as wit' any fly cop livin'—an' sooner, 'cause yeh're square, an' if yeh says yeh won't pros'-

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cute yeh won't," said Chicago Mike, causing the bill which had been slipped into his hand to disappear under the bedclothes. "An' I ain't likely to spill no story to the bulls as I ain't got none to spill, 'ceptin' that about the rattler. But if yeh's figurin' on my comin' through with a bit of info' to you later on, somethin' more'n a fiver has got to pass."

"Tell me all that happened last night," said the detective, "and I'll agree to get you off on any charge that's brought against you—short of murder."

"Murder?" Mike sat abruptly up in bed, then lowered himself carefully to the pillow, his eyes dilated with fright. "Are—are yeh kiddin' me? Yeh know I never croaked a guy in my life."

"I know you never did, unless it was last night. But there was murder done. Are you ready to come clean?"

Chicago Mike shook his head.

"I don't know what yeh're talkin' about. G'wan an' leave me alone. I'm tired an' sick. Come back if yeh want to, but this here seeants is over."

Not another word would he say, and McClue knew that it was useless trying to pump out anything further until the fellow had had time to decide upon a line of action.

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At the desk the pleasant-faced young woman was waiting, no longer quite so pleasant.

"I was called out," she said crisply, "but I saw that that man knew you—and what you did with his fingers."

"Then you must have stopped to peek in at the door before you got finally on your way."

"I did. But who is he? And who are you? A policeman, I suppose."

"He's one of the biggest crooks in the country, and—there's my card. But I'm not connected with the force, and would esteem it a favor if you would refrain from mentioning my call. I'd be the last person in the world to get the hospital into the newspapers in connection with any crime story. The police are not always so considerate."

"You bet they're not! We had a case here last winter—!"

The eyes of the young woman glared darkly. Then, as McClue continued to regard her, a sudden dimple appeared at the corner of her mouth.

"Good!" he laughed. "You see I'm not half as black as Satan. And you'll let me in again sometime, won't you?"

"Oh, I suppose I'll have to—you look as if you were used to having your own way. But

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'do keep it out of the papers. The patrons—most of them are patronesses, really—just hate notoriety, outside of the society column, and take it out on me.'"

Believing that he had done a good day's work, the Ferret started back for the Towers by the way he had come. Mike was a valuable find. That it was he whose fall had disturbed the gravel at the foot of the lightning-rod—and he, who, with a broken leg, had dragged himself painfully across the grounds—there seemed little reason for doubting. Yet why, with a ladder at hand, had he attempted such a perilous mode of descent? And how reconcile the presence of a skillful crook with the non-disappearance of any articles of value from the premises? In the last analysis, Mike only complicated matters.

There was also the snuff-box found at the foot of the stairs. Mike was about the last person in the world to be suspected of carrying a snuff-box, or of dropping one if he had stolen it. Reaching the laboratory and finding that Lounsbury was not about, McClue decided that it was a good time to see just what sort of snuff the box had contained. Copious traces of white powder suggested arsenic rather than tobacco, and he had not forgotten that a poisoned dog remained to be accounted for.

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Seating himself at a convenient table, the detective lighted a spirit lamp, crumbled some charcoal from the burnt match with a few grains of the white powder, put the mixture on the point of a knife and plunged it into the flame. If this were *arsenious acid*, the test would reduce it to *metallic arsenic*, which would betray its presence by a pungent, garlicky odor. But he sniffed in vain. The odor failed to materialize.

"Something more interesting here than dog-poison, I guess," he muttered, taking down from the well-stocked shelves a bottle labeled "Concentrated Nitric Acid." Touched with the acid, a morsel of the powder flushed to a rich orange and slowly faded to yellow. The test was positive. He knew what he had found.

At this moment he chanced to look up—and confronted the steady, expressionless eyes of his servant, Yen Hui. He shivered in spite of himself. Eyes so utterly opaque seemed scarcely human.

"I come see why no eat him lunch," explained the oriental.

"I'd forgotten it. Think you could rustle around and get me a bit before dinner?"

"I go fetch light away."

"All right, Son of Heaven. But when you come back make a noise more like a man and

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less like a shadow—savvy? You scared me out of a year's growth."

Yen Hui departed—so stealthily that he left the impression of having faded away. McClue returned to his chemistry, carrying on a broken conversation with himself, as was his wont when deeply absorbed.

"Freely soluble in *aqua pura*—it isn't the alkaloid, then, it's the salts. No need of looking further, but I might as well make doubly sure."

Certainly Lounsbury kept a remarkable collection of chemicals. It even yielded *sulphomolybdic acid*, which, when mingled with the powder turned it an intense crimson, changing gradually to green and finally to sapphire blue.

"See that?" he cried, turning to Yen Hui who had again approached unannounced—this time bearing a tray heavily loaded with eatables. "You savvy magic? I've just discovered that there is a very bad man somewhere in the world."

"Plenty bad man evelywhere."

"Queer customer, that Chink," thought McClue, as he fell to work with knife and fork; "and I guess he's right. I know I'd hate to be the one he thinks poisoned his dog."

But it was very quiet and comfortable in the laboratory, and by the time he had finished eating and was enjoying a cigarette, a strange

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vagueness had come over his ideas. A pleasant vagueness it was, too, and did not interfere in the least with the sharpness of a series of gorgeously colored but meaningless images which began to float before his imagination. No longer in the mood for serious mental work, he felt lazily happy and rather wished for someone to talk to. The entrance of Lounsbury, with his earnest face and stained and wrinkled clothes, seemed particularly well timed.

"Just the man I was looking for," declared McClue. "I wanted to ask you—let me see—a thousand things."

"Right-o." The two having already made up the little quarrel incident to the discovery that both were not professional scientists, the photographer's expression betokened nothing but frankness and good-will.

"You see," McClue went on, doubtfully, like a man who has already forgotten what he meant to say, "I've been wondering—that is—oh, yes!—I wanted to know about the wiring in this house."

"It's the newest system," responded the other, cocking his feet comfortably on a window-sill and leaning back in his chair. "The main switch-board is on the lower floor off the dining-room."

"And from the main board you can work the

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bedroom lights—even those that are turned off at the fixtures?”

“No, you can’t. But who turns a light off at the fixture when there is a button in the wall?”

“And the buttons don’t interfere with the main switch?”

“Certainly not. A man at the main switch last night could have done—just what he evidently did do. Is that what you wanted to know?”

“Not exactly,” responded the detective, wondering why he wanted to whistle and why he felt no interest whatever in Lounsbury’s answers. “I wanted to know what you were doing with a camera in the card-room.”

“I sometimes shoot scenes from there,” said the photographer, lighting a pipe and looking fixedly out of the window.

“And sometimes you take a look at what is going on—eh, old scout?” The Ferret got up from his seat and slapped his friend heartily on the shoulder, aware as he did so that he was not behaving like himself. There seemed to be two McClues, one that felt very much like talking nonsense, and another that stood aside and merely looked on.

Lounsbury responded to this advance by a quick, questioning glance. Then as the detective went back to his chair, he laughed.

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"You've been feeding yourself rather well, haven't you, Mac?"

"Why, I don't know. The Chink that Farlow gave me *did* bring in a pretty good spread.

"Yen Hui? Are you going to have *him* in here with us?"

"Not if you don't wish it, son."

"Oh, I don't mind. But I guess he carries the key to the cellar, all right."

"Meaning that he served me with a mighty good bottle of wine?"

Of McClue's recently acquired dual personality, the half that stood aside and watched was inclined to resent the insinuation carried by the photographer's remark. Couldn't anybody see that the wine was hardly touched? Really it was time to inform all impertinent young men that the Ferret was proverbially temperate in his habits. But the other McClue suddenly felt very sleepy. It was simply impossible for him to keep awake.

Lounsbury watched while the detective spread his arms out on the table among the dishes and the bottles and buried his head in the pillow thus made. Then a half pitying, half contemptuous sneer twisted his lip.

"So this is the great sleuth!" he said to himself. "I fancy Bollar's laurels are safe, after all."

CHAPTER X

GET-AWAYS, AMATEUR AND PROFESSIONAL

THERE was a tap at the door; and after waiting a moment Lounsbury rose and admitted—Olga Legrand.

“Are you alone, Lonny?” she asked, hurrying in.

Lounsbury pointed to the slumbering McClue.

“Not exactly alone, but we have the place to ourselves to all intents and purposes.”

Olga tiptoed across the room and regarded the detective from the distance of a close-up.

“You’re sure he isn’t just putting on?”

“No, it’s a genuine snooze right enough. And he didn’t have but about half a bottle, either—that is, after he came here—unless he carries a flask in his pocket.”

“So, that’s the kind of a man he is! I thought he was something quite different. But perhaps it is just as well. Who knows what he would have found out if he had been the real thing?”

“Who knows!” said Lounsbury, with a shrug.

He had resumed his seat and his pipe, but this time his back was to the sunset and his gaze

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upon the woman. She made a striking figure as she stood there, clothed in a gleaming fabric of violet and mauve, with a corsage of metallic brocade falling over invisible wires in deference to then new Parisian "profile."

"You must be wondering what I came for," she said, sinking gracefully to a low stool and gazing directly at her host.

The latter nodded.

"I don't suppose it was just to make love to me."

"From any other man in the house that would mean they couldn't imagine what *else* my errand could be. Just because I've got a body which shows which sex I belong to, they think—but you, Lonny, though you don't like me very well, I really believe you respect me."

"Why not? I'm not much of a lady's man, and I don't care, you know, what sex you belong to. But you've never interfered with me. What's the idea now?"

"Just this. I want you to teach me photography."

Lounsbury started. Olga Legrand laughed.

"That *does* sound as if I came to play the vampire, doesn't it? But I'm in earnest. I want you to teach me photography—that is, to develop pictures. I was you know—in love with Jean Estamps."

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"I believe you were. But what's that got to do with pictures?"

"A good deal. I need something to distract me, to keep me from thinking."

"That's not your real purpose."

"Perhaps it isn't. But we must have some excuse between us, and that's as good as any. There is truth in it, too. I'm lonesome. Everybody hates me, nearly. Even the men—they *want* me, but they're all ready to turn against me, from Farlow down. They despise themselves for feeling my influence. They'd rather be enslaved by what they consider their higher natures. And the women are jealous. Women are always jealous of passion. It reduces us all to a level where it is rather worse to win than to lose. Pah! I know them. And I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of everything. When Bollar is through fooling with Darehurst and Philippa, don't you think I would make a lovely scape-goat? 'Infatuated with Estamps, she killed him in a jealous rage,'—doesn't that sound plausible? And I could have done it, too. He was in love with Philippa, as you must have noticed."

"But why are you telling *me* all this?" Lounsbury turned again to the window, as if he would like to keep clear of human problems and

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have his mind free for his *ions* and *atoms*. "It sounds as if you had something up your sleeve."

"Likely enough. Maybe it sounds, too, as if I wasn't as innocent as I pretend--about the murder. I don't care. All I ask is that you teach me photography, and say nothing about it to anyone. Let them think that we are having a flirtation."

"You seem in earnest about it."

"I'm in deadly earnest. If you refuse me I don't know what I shall do."

"Well, for heaven's sake don't start any noise, like you did last night." The photographer rose slowly to his feet and stretched his arms above his head. "Let people think what they like. I'll show you how to run the developing machine, and the rest of the ordinary tricks, though I'll be hanged if I know what you are really driving at. If it's anything that will annoy Farlow, I'm your man."

"You—you don't like him?"

"I believe I enjoy that unique distinction."

"Lonny, it's not unique. I *hate* him!"

She held out her hand with a gesture rather suggestive of melodrama. Lounsbury took and shook it with good-natured and lazy indifference. The two were puttering about among the chemicals, preparing for the first lesson, when the laboratory doorbell tinkled. It

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was Clara Hope inquiring for Ferris McClue.

"I don't know where you'll find him," said Lounsbury, blocking the doorway and hoping that she would not attempt to look past him. "Has anything gone wrong?"

"No," said Clara, "but I must find him—or somebody."

"Wouldn't Bollar do? I thought I saw him passing the window a few minutes ago."

"He might."

"Then you'd better hurry and catch him. Unless he means to stay here for dinner, he'll soon be going back to the village."

"Thank you. I'll try to overtake him. I must. It's really important."

"Anything I can do?"

"No—unless I fail to find Mr. Bollar. Then I'll let you know."

She turned away, and Lounsbury went back to his pupil in chemistry.

"Looks as if something was up," he remarked. "Wonder if I should have let her see our slumbering friend."

"Of course not," said Olga; "not in his present condition. She's quite taken up with him. I've seen them talking together."

"She couldn't have wanted him for anything very personal this time, Olga. She's going to call in Bollar as a substitute."

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"She *says* she is. But anyway, I think we did right to keep them apart. Are you altogether certain that you want to help him—this McClue, here, I mean, in case it's something *impersonal*?"

"I'm not sure of anything excepting that I mean to keep clear of the whole business if I can."

"That's right. We don't know which way the cat is going to jump. But I wonder what he was doing just before he fell asleep."

"He was talking to me—had just finished his lunch."

"But there are a lot of chemicals among the dishes."

"By Jove! So there are." Lounsbury examined the labels one after another. "Nitric Acid; Aqua Pura; Sulphomolybdic Acid. And two tests, one with a yellow reaction and one with a blue."

"Can you tell from them what he was doing?"

"It looks to me, Olga, as if he'd been analysing this white powder you see in the little box here. I think I'll try it, myself."

He took a solution of *iodic acid*, mixed it with *carbon sulphide*, and watched the powder touched with mixture turn pink.

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"What is it?" whispered Olga, half terrified.
'Some kind of poison?'"

"Depends on how you look at it. The powder contains salts of morphia, that's certain."

"Morphia! Had he found it out?"

"I judge so; both his tests are positive."

Olga drew slowly away from the table.

"Lonny, I'm afraid of that man. He'll discover everything after all."

"What is there to discover, do you know?"

The two stared for a moment into each other's eyes, but saw only a mutual question.

"If you loved Estamps you oughtn't to object to having his murderer run down," Lounsbury finally went on.

"What I meant has nothing to do with that."

"What then?"

"Dear man! Was there nothing in this house to be hidden even while Jean was alive?"

"I've often suspected queer goings on."

"Yes; Philippa—"

"As to her, I'm not going to believe there is anything wrong at all."

"I'm not asking you to. I was only going to say that she's unhappy about something. I simply adore her in spite of myself."

"Good enough! But since there has been a murder, I don't suppose we ought to put ob-

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stacles in the way of those who are trying to find out the truth."

"You needn't worry about the murder, Lonny. I—I know who did it."

Olga had been speaking quietly enough, but now her voice rose to a shrill note which ended in a peal of half maniacal laughter.

Lounsbury snatched up the bottle of *aqua pura*, poured out a liberal glassful, and promptly dashed the contents in her face.

"There! I don't want to be a brute, but you simply can't go on this way. The windows are open. And, if you know anything you are not supposed to know, keep still about it or go to the police. Don't come confiding it to me."

The actress gasped, rubbed the water out of her eyes, and laughed softly in a natural tone.

"You are terrible, Lonny! But you know how to manage me. God! It's a relief not to have to fight down every impulse by myself. I'm not going to confide in you—never fear. You shan't have *me* on your conscience. But keep this package for me; will you?"

She picked up a cylinder neatly wrapped in paper and sealed with red wax, which she had managed to toss into a corner unnoticed when she first entered the room.

"What is it?" asked Lounsbury, reluctantly taking it in his hand.

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"Nothing but some memoranda stuffed into one of those rolls that prints are shipped in. I don't want it found on me, and yet I want it found—in case I should die or disappear."

"Die or disappear?"

"Yes; how can I tell you more if you don't want to get mixed up in things?"

"Very well, Olga. My opinion is that you are a pure fake, and that the package contains nothing at all."

"Good! Keep on thinking that and we can be friends. You wouldn't like me as more than a friend. But some day a woman—oh! an entirely different sort of a woman—not as impulsive as I nor so distant as Philippa—will come and do the most dreadful things to you. I'm not sure that she hasn't appeared already. Studying chemical reactions the way you do, you ought to realize how dangerous it is—when just the right mixture comes along."

"I do," said Lounsbury, placing the cylinder out of sight on a shelf behind a row of bottles. "And as I know you are a fool only part of the time, I'll look out for this dangerous feminine *reagent*. Now go and change your dress for dinner—and wear a waterproof the next time you think of throwing a fit in here."

"But it's a bargain? You are to teach me developing?"

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"Yes, if you behave yourself. Get away before our audience wakes up."

Once more Olga attentively regarded McClue.

"He doesn't look as if he was going to wake up very soon. You'd better look after him, Lonny. He isn't drunk at all, if you want my opinion."

Lounsbury stooped, lifted one of the Ferret's eyelids, noted the contracted pupil, and made a clicking noise with his tongue.

"Is it what I thought?" asked Olga.

"Yes, he has doped himself good and plenty—morphia in front of him, morphia inside him. A fine addition to our little colony!"

"But why was he taking the trouble to analyze it if he is an addict?"

"I don't know. They take queer notions. Perhaps somebody has been trying to sell him adulterated stuff, and the old fox was making sure."

"In that case he didn't find it here."

"No, I guess he brought it with him. And between you and me it looks like a heavy dose. Run along and I'll give him a jolt."

Lounsbury was no physician, but he had begun the study of medicine before chemical science absorbed his attention, and as soon as Olga was gone he filled a hypodermic and injected a small quantity of *atrophene* into his

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patient's arm. Then, with no idea that he was doing injustice in his thought to a perfectly worthy member of society, he decided that he would dine with the general company that evening, and—donning a better coat—slipped out.

Ten or fifteen minutes later, McClue opened his eyes. His head ached and he was suffering slightly from nausea, while his thoughts were confused with the memory of fantastic dreams.

"I wonder what's the matter with me," he said to himself, going over to the window and inhaling deep breaths of the cool breeze of approaching twilight. Most of all he was puzzled by a tingling pain in his arm. But as he rapidly began to feel better he decided that he must have wrenched a muscle sometime while too much occupied to notice it—or perhaps pricked himself through his sleeve with a thorn or sharp twig when climbing over the wall.

Someone had removed the remains of his luncheon. Yen Hui had been back, then. Well, that was perfectly all right, though the idea of that inscrutable Chinaman prowling about so near him while he slept was distinctly disagreeable. It was curious how sleep had overcome him, he felt. But his brain was still slightly clouded, and it was without any suspicion of the truth that he cleared away all traces of his experiments and set out for a stroll. He had no

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definite plan nor any intention of looking for clues, but he had not gone far before he heard voices and recognized Clara Hope and Bollar standing beneath one of the lordly elms which were the chief distinction of the grounds.

Circumstances favored a nearer approach—for there is no secure privacy out-of-doors save in the midst of open spaces—and in less than no time, moved rather by habit than intention, he was at the other side of the tree.

“In disguise?” Bollar was saying.

“Yes,” responded Clara, “disguised as a policeman. And he is to escape this very evening. He may be escaping now.”

“No, he’ll wait till after dark if he tries it at all,” affirmed the Chief, largely. “But you ought to have told me sooner.”

“How could I, when I’ve been looking for you for over half an hour? And if you don’t believe my information is correct—”

“I ain’t said I don’t, Miss. I said it was your dooty to tell me where you got it.”

“I’ll not do that.”

“Then I suppose I’ll have to be thankful you condescended to tell me at all. I’m only the Chief of Police, and even a word is a good deal to expect, the way things is runnin’ here.”

“I’m sure I’d do anything—”

“Never mind! I’ll attend to Darehurst. All

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you need do now is hold your tongue. Tell nobody else—nobody, understand?”

“Whom should I tell? I don’t want to injure Mr. Darehurst. I’m sure this is merely some piece of foolishness on his part. It doesn’t mean anything. But I thought it would be still worse for him and for all concerned if he succeeded in getting away.”

“He wouldn’t have got far,” boasted the Chief. “But you’re right. It’ll be much better as it is. Remember now—not a word. I’m after going to warn my men at the gates.”

McClue listened to this conversation with growing surprise. The news of Darehurst’s intended flight was in itself unlooked for, though experience had taught him that even the least likely suspect was apt to take to his heels when the charge was murder. But why had Clara Hope confided in Bollar?

Fearing that he might be discovered when the two separated, he retreated hastily and resumed his walk, so intent upon this new problem that before he again noticed his surroundings he had reached a part of the grounds which had hitherto escaped his investigations. In front of him lay what looked at first like a street in a small Western town. But closer inspection showed that most of the houses were without roofs, or with only parts of roofs, and that every one was a

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sham, having a substantial looking front but little if anything in the rear. One of the structures represented a four-story frame building in course of erection; and directly behind it, hidden by a sort of camouflage, ran the great inclosing wall of the estate. It was not a town but a "location" for the staging of a screen drama. What if Darehurst, outwitting Bollar and his guarded gates, should choose this spot for his get-away? There would be little difficulty here in climbing the wall.

Already there was the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps, and the detective had barely time to secrete himself behind a shrub when a man in the uniform of an officer of the law came into view and began climbing the scaffolding in front of the unfinished structure.

Policemen are not usually so spry, and though dusk was now an accomplished fact, the identity of the athlete was not for a moment in doubt. Moreover, he couldn't have seemed more sure of his movements had he carefully rehearsed them. Never once did he hesitate as to where to put his foot or along what beam to run. It was like a practiced "stunt," such as one sees on the screen.

McClue stood watching, not wishing to call a halt until the intent to scale the wall had been clearly manifest, when suddenly the course of

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events was interrupted. A stout-looking piece of woodwork gave way, and with it a whole section of scaffolding came crashing down. Darehurst—for Darehurst it was—stood in imminent likelihood of being killed. But with incredible skill and audacity he leaped free of the falling timbers, caught hold on a window-sill, twisted his legs around a scaffolding-pole which had remained in place, and slid unharmed to the ground.

“Don’t try to run,” said the Ferret, abruptly showing himself. “I don’t want to have to shoot you in the leg. No, don’t draw, either, or I’ll have to let you have it in the arm.”

He had pulled out an automatic, and stood obviously ready to carry either threat into execution. Darehurst stood blinking as if a flashlight had been thrown in his face.

“So, you had that timber sawed half in two to trap me!” he growled finally.

“Nonsense!” McClue protested. “Not even the police would do such a thing as that. But Bollar knows that you are trying to escape, and is on your trail this minute.”

“Aren’t you working with Bollar?” asked the other, altering his manner.

“No.”

“Then, see here! Why can’t you let me go? I’m not the man you’re looking for—that is—

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you don't know what you are doing by trying to keep me here."

"Yes, I do. I'm preventing you from making a great mistake."

"It isn't just myself, Mr. McClue. I—"

"If you mean you want to serve Miss Bell, the mistake is even worse."

"But you can't possibly understand."

"I know I don't. I'm reasoning on general principles. If you ever convince me that it would be better for her to have you gone, I'll even help you escape."

"Do you mean that?"

"I give you my word," said McClue. "But what was that about a timber sawed half in two? Are you certain?"

"Of course. Look—here it is now."

He kicked the treacherous length of wood with his foot.

"This is what came down with me. You can see the marks of the saw even in this light. The part that broke wouldn't have held a cat."

"Did you ever climb up this particular bit of carpentry before?"

"Yes; we've rehearsed here on the lot several times—we were going to shoot a scene or two with this setting. But it never came off."

"And you always climbed the same way—by the same timbers, I mean?"

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"Always; the route was prearranged when the thing was built."

"But I thought Estamps took your place in such bits?"

"He wasn't to this time. I got tired of having him around."

"Does what just happened suggest anything to you?"

"Heaps. Estamps sawed the stick in hopes that I would fall and break my neck. I'm certain of that since I see now that it couldn't very well have been you. He was jealous of me—professionally."

"Oh! In that case your idea is certainly worth thinking of," admitted the detective.

"It doesn't require thinking. But—you swear you are not going to arrest me?"

"No, I'm going to take your parole not to try to run away again."

"What if I refuse?"

"You won't."

"True, you don't leave me much choice."

"Right. I have your promise?"

"Yes."

"Then give me your coat and helmet, and go straight to Lounsbury's workshop. Wait there till I come. If you meet Bollar, deny everything—say you are out for a walk. I'll hide these policeman's togs and get you another pair

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of trousers. But those blue ones you have on will do for a trip across the grounds."

Wearing the Ferret's coat and hat, Darehurst reached the laboratory without seeing a soul. McClue, who was more observant, noticed a man with heavy-rimmed spectacles and a beard approaching through the shrubbery, and quickly hid his bundle beneath a bush. It would never do to have it known that a uniform had been in civilian hands that evening. But the stranger suddenly altered his route, and disappeared—as if he, too, had sharp eyes and a reason for disliking company.

McClue was so absorbed in trailing him that he quite forgot the bundle; and then, having lost the scent and finding himself already near the laboratory, decided to make inquiries before proceeding farther.

"Who was that fellow?" he asked, entering and closing the door.

"What fellow?" returned Darehurst, who was struggling out of the detective's coat—too tight-fitting for his own enormous shoulders.

"He wore glasses," said McClue, minutely describing the man he had seen.

"Oh, he's a Russian, or something—I forget his name. He doesn't belong here, but comes around once in a while, trying to sell scenarios, I believe. It doesn't matter about him. But

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do hurry to my room and get me some of my own clothes."

The Ferret listened innocently while the other described how the apartment was to be reached, and departed. Near the end of the last corridor he encountered Philippa.

"That was a very foolish thing which you tried to do this evening," he began abruptly.

"What thing?"

"Trying to get Darehurst out of the way. But don't be alarmed. I stopped him before any harm was done, and the secret is safe with me. I wish you would remember that I am your friend, and in the future consult me before doing anything drastic."

"How do I know you're a friend?" she gasped, leaning weakly against the wainscot.

"I have just proved it."

"But what makes you so certain that I was responsible for this attempt?"

"You don't deny it. The thing that puzzles me is—why you favored such a plan."

"I thought it was best. Perhaps you mean to be a friend, but I couldn't help wanting him beyond the reach of—mistakes. Won't you tell me who betrayed us? I can't endure having to think that every person I meet may be a traitor."

"No one betrayed you," said McClue, gently taking Philippa's hands, which remained inert

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and lifeless within his own. "I merely happened to see him trying to climb the walls. His disguise was good enough for theatricals, but neither of you are the sort that ought to play ducks and drakes with the law."

"Then if it hadn't been for you—"

"If it hadn't been for me he'd have made a start—and been brought back later with handcuffs."

"But nobody knew of his intention."

"Perhaps not; yet there was a rumor already afloat."

"Then, somebody did betray us!"

"No, it was only a rumor. There are always such rumors, Miss Bell. But don't you think it would be better if you told me all you knew? He is safe and sound—and you are actually trembling. Something else is preying on your mind."

"No, no! There is nothing to tell. I see that you mean to be kind, and if you can clear up this crime I shall bless you to my dying day. I am almost distracted from worrying, that is all—for fear some innocent person will be made to suffer. You don't know how you have relieved me already."

But she did not look relieved, and McClue was reminded of a wonderful picture he had once seen in a gallery in Paris—the picture of a

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queen about to be led out to execution. And his heart was stirred by the same emotion which had stirred it then. Forgetting that this was republican America and the twentieth century, he stooped and kissed her hand, quite as an old cavalier might have done.

With that he left her, found a suitable outfit for Darehurst, and—having helped the owner of it to make himself once more presentable—bought him of Chicago Mike. By omitting dinner altogether he might get another glimpse of that worthy before calling it a day. He even had an idea that Mike, deciding that a little State's evidence offered the easiest escape from present difficulties, would put in his hands the missing end of the thread—the solution of the whole tangle.

This time there was no surreptitious scaling of rear walls or sneaking out by back ways. Boldly preempting an automobile at Ivy Towers' own garage, where the authority delegated to him by Farlow seemed to be perfectly understood and the only difficulty was in convincing a number of ready chauffeurs that their services were not desired, the Ferret set forth like a conqueror.

It was pride riding for a fall. Hardly had he stuck his head in at the hospital door before he saw that the woman on duty at the desk was a

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stranger. But as an offset to this threatened obstacle—for one simply cannot tell in advance what difficulties a hospital functionary will or will not make—the pleasant-faced girl of his former call was already approaching, dressed for the street. He resolved on the instant to wait for her, and to behave as if he had never had any intention save that of seeing her home.

She accepted his escort without question. There was even a hint of eagerness in the way she took his arm and hurried him up the street away from his machine.

"I knew you would want to see me," she volunteered.

"Yes, I wanted to know if the lady in charge is apt to object to my calling on our broken-legged friend after hours. Perhaps you would take me to him? I'd really like to have a witness if he's ready to talk."

"But he has gone," broke in his companion. "Thank heaven I wasn't on duty when it happened. And of course I wasn't sure that you weren't at the bottom of it."

"Gone?" McClue stopped in his tracks. "Why, he couldn't walk. You mean he has been transferred to another hospital?"

"I mean he has disappeared. But don't stop here where we might be noticed. Of course he couldn't walk, and of course he wasn't trans-

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ferred. There isn't any other hospital. He went through the window, somehow. It's rather high from the ground, but there is absolutely no other way he could have gone."

"Then he never did it alone."

"That's exactly my opinion," agreed the nurse.

"Did he have any visitors after I left?"

"Yes; someone telephoned, asking if we had an accident case—almost in the very words you put to me. Then a friend came to see him—late this afternoon."

"Tell me—was this friend—how did he look?"

"I only caught a glimpse of him. But he wore shell-rimmed glasses and a black beard."

"A Russian-looking sort of person?"

"Now that you mention it, I should say he was, rather. But you won't tell that I have breathed a word of this?"

"Of course not; you have done me too great a favor. And you may congratulate yourself. Your hospital is now out of the case."

The Ferret, having taken leave of his informant, returned to his car and made speed towards Ivy Towers. He had spoken of having been done a favor, but he looked as if the whole universe had conspired to do him an injury. His fighting blood was up.

CHAPTER XI

ENEMY MOVES

LOUNSBURY, in keeping McClue's untimely nap a secret from Clara Hope, had set in motion a series of events the end of which he was far from foreseeing. For the Ferret's assistant would have known at a glance that the drug had been administered by some third party, and had she been admitted a general explanation would have taken place.

As it was, the Ferret not only missed a warning, but—more important by far, as it afterwards proved—the photographer, himself, was left in that state of huff which moved him to dine in the great hall, as far from his new found friend as possible. Thus it happened that Olga Legrand, growing dissatisfied with the hiding-place of her cylindrical package and returning to arrange for a better, found the laboratory quite deserted.

Both she and Lounsbury had now a great contempt for the detective's powers, and McClue—to make confusion worse confounded—was keeping away from Clara so that he would not have

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to speak of her supposedly thoughtless consultation with Bollar. Even Clara had her grievance, for she had been watching from around a corner when her employer kissed Philippa's hand; and Minnie, not to be left out of this tangle of cross purposes, had spied through a window upon Olga and Lounsbury at the very moment when the Vamp, responding to heroic treatment, was thanking him for his understanding of her temperament.

It was just as Olga was deciding to go back to the laboratory that Minnie, full of her new trouble, encountered Clara in one of the halls.

"What have you been doing?" she began, suddenly drawn out of herself by Clara's expression. "You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"No, I've only seen a silly old maid—in the looking-glass. And I'm hard at work now trying to forget her."

"O-ho! You're jealous about something. So am I. Olga is buzzing around my man again. I heard her calling him 'Lonny.' But can I help you?"

"You might try to get Olga's finger-prints for me. I've already got Philippa's and her maid's."

"*Will* I? Here she comes now. Just watch."

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Minnie took a tiny mirror from her vanity-bag and boldly advanced.

"Is this yours, Miss Legrand?" she called out. "I just found it in front of your door."

"Certainly not," said the Vampire coldly, returning the trinket which had been forced into her hand.

But her fingers had touched the polished surface, and Minnie went back to Clara in triumph.

"The cat is on her way to the laboratory again, and here are her claws for your collection. What splendid chances for revenge a detective has!"

But Clara silenced her with a gesture. Gliding noiselessly in Olga's wake, so intent that he never saw that he was watched, was a man wearing shell-rimmed glasses. He carried his hat in his hand, revealing a head of long, dark and rather unkempt hair, which matched the beard that nearly covered his face.

"Who is that, Minnie?"

"His name is Solovief, I believe," Minnie whispered back. "He's a writer, they say. Isn't he acting queer? He must have been hiding behind something, waiting for her. She is always having queer affairs with men."

The girls reached the dining-room and found places waiting them at Philippa's own table.

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Most of the regular diners had either finished or failed to appear, but Lounsbury was there, together with three or four ladies and gentlemen of a type ostentatiously literary.

"They are our authors, scenario and continuity writers, and such," explained Minnie in an undertone. "That stout woman at the head of the table who is bowing to you is Mrs. Childs. She acts as housekeeper—an awful melancholy creature, but a relative of Philippa's I think, from the way everybody treats her.

"Here, let me give you my own contribution. And now I hope you'll excuse me."

The Mouse had imprinted the mark of her thumb in the bowl of a spoon, caught Lounsbury's eye, and boldly slipped over to a place beside him. As the minutes passed, the others one after another rose and went out. Finally even Mrs. Childs abandoned her place, said a few perfunctory words of welcome to Clara in passing, and left the room. Clara found the spectacle of Minnie and Lounsbury, sitting with their heads close together and conversing inaudibly, more than she could bear. It made her feel that the maiden she had spoken of as seeing in the glass was very lonely and good for nothing. So she picked up an individual salt-shaker which she knew Mrs. Childs had fingered, hid it

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in the bosom of her dress, and sought the consolation of a solitary walk outside beneath the trees.

She was approaching a summer-house perched prettily on the bank of a tiny and no doubt artificial brook, when a muffled explosion caught her ear, and turning quickly she saw that the windows in the isolated wing where Lounsbury's laboratory was situated were a mass of broken glass from which issued a thin cloud of dust and smoke. Shouts began to sound from every direction, and before she could reach the scene of the disaster the way in front of her was blocked by an excited crowd.

"Olga Legrand is killed!" cried someone. "She went crazy and tried to set fire to the building."

"Lounsbury was with her," added another.

"No, it was that Russian."

"The New York detective was seen going there, too."

"Yes, he was blown to bits."

"Just what I said—another murder. We'll all be killed if the police don't let us get away from here."

But in spite of this suggestion, and the openly expressed fear of a second explosion from such of the chemical stores as might yet remain, the crowd—with the traditional folly of human be-

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ings everywhere when doomed to act as a group and not as individuals—only pressed the nearer. Clara, oblivious to everything but one appalling idea, fought in vain for an opening, until suddenly McClue, himself, appeared at one of the ruined windows.

“Get back, please!” he shouted. “Nobody seems to be hurt, and the fire is out. Is Olga Legrand there?”

A confused murmur arose.

“No!”

“What did I tell you?”

“This is all a bluff. He knows very well that she’s buried under the ruins if they haven’t already found her.”

“You’re right. Somebody was after her—and got her, I’ve heard say.”

McClue leaped out, and in his wake came Lounsbury and Bollar. The crowd began to be more amenable to reason, and drew back to let them through. All at once there was a shout:

“Here is Olga Legrand now!”

That young lady was indeed approaching—and from the direction of the summer-house. But Clara turned her back without waiting to learn anything further, and made her way slowly to the library. The emotion which went surging through her at the sight of McClue, safe

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and sound, had frightened her. She wanted to be alone.

By the time that the Ferret entered and found her, quietly reading a book, another change had come. One would have said that everything in her which had ever been school-teacher had reasserted itself, and even the dainty dress she still wore seemed to have taken on the prim undemonstrativeness of the abandoned tailor-made.

"Anyway, you're not excitable," snapped McClue, dropping into a seat.

"I learned that nothing serious had happened," Clara lowered her book to explain. "There seemed no use in adding to the confusion by staying outside."

"My word, Clara! You're a regular thinking-machine. But who told you it wasn't serious? That Russian scenario-writer has disappeared, for one thing, and I am not at all certain but what that's the least of my troubles."

"Solovief?"

"I believe that's what he calls himself."

"But I saw him—"

"You saw him half an hour before the explosion—so Minnie tells me. I have an idea too, that he was your night-prowler—the man without a face. His whiskers would account for that."

ENEMY MOVES

“Is it possible that he was killed?”

“No, or we would have found the body long ago. The laboratory is not badly wrecked. He must have taken advantage of the rumpus, and pulled his freight. Olga says she didn’t see him at all, and that she fell asleep in the summer house and didn’t know that there was anything wrong until she heard the people shouting—a likely story! But she had to say something to explain her late appearance on the scene. She is always late, you notice.

“I was of the opinion that this was an attempted attack on Olga, herself, or an attempt to destroy something of hers which she had hidden in the laboratory so well that it couldn’t be found. Lounsbury was with her there this afternoon; but I can’t get a word out of him. Hang me if I understand his manner, or Olga’s—or yours, for the matter of that.”

Clara ventured no explanation, being entirely unaware that his reference was to her interview with Bollar; and McClue, suddenly checking an explosion of temper which might have led to the clearing up of many things, asked what luck she had had in getting finger-prints.

She produced quite a collection of small articles and spread them out on the table before her. There was the spoon upon which Minnie had imprinted her thumb, the mirror bearing

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traces of Olga's fingers, the salt-shaker from Mrs. Childs' place at the table, a paper-cutter which Rosalie had handled, and the lid of a powder-box taken from Philippa's boudoir. The Ferret took a candle-end from his pocket and carefully compared the various impressions with that on the wax.

"Whose is this?" he asked finally, holding up the mirror.

"Olga Legrand's."

"Then it was she who pinched out the candle. See? A right thumb with a *double whorl*—rather peculiar and absolutely unmistakable. She must have learned that she wasn't alone and taken off her shoes. You heard high heels at first, you remember, and then nothing. And to make her movements doubly safe she doused the glim. It wasn't Philippa, after all."

"Of course it wasn't," said Clara, eager for this opportunity of easing her conscience for some of the wicked wishes which had shaped themselves in her brain in spite of all she could do. "She is one of the truest and sweetest creatures that ever lived. I was so afraid that you—being a man—wouldn't be able to see it!"

McClue had taken up the box-lid and was sniffing it. Finally he touched the inside surface with his tongue.

"Being a man I wouldn't be able to see it?"

ENEMY MOVES

Why, that's just the reason—Clara, who does this belong to?"

"Philippa. I—"

"Then let me tell you. I believe that a crime is being attempted beneath this roof which makes the murder of Estamps a comparatively trivial matter. I seem to feel an influence at work about me all the time. I can't see it; but it never rests, and its resources are uncanny. It's so abominably evil that—but here comes Darehurst on the jump."

"Look here!" Darehurst began, approaching the detective in a manner almost threatening. "Did you go through the things in my room when you were there looking for my clothes?"

"Of course not—and if I had I wouldn't have left signs of it behind me. What's the matter? Anything missing?"

"No, nothing is missing excepting a clock. Who the devil would steal a clock? But all my papers have been searched and scattered about the floor. Bollar says he didn't do it. Now, who did?"

"Keep cool," advised the Ferret quietly. And then to Clara:

"You see? Another enemy move. But this time it lets a little light on the subject—at last!"

CHAPTER XII

OLGA ENTERTAINS

CLARA was sitting alone in the summer-house watching the brook through one of the latticed windows. Several days had passed since the Ferret's alleged discovery of light, and still the mystery—to her at least—was as dark as ever.

She understood, of course, that the upsetting of Darehurst's room might indicate that Estamps was murdered in the course of an unsuccessful robbery, and that the object sought had probably been some sort of document—still undiscovered, if Darehurst was to be believed. He denied all knowledge of such a document, that was the worst of it. The investigation seemed to be at a standstill.

If McClue was making progress, he kept it to himself. Certainly he didn't behave like a man hiding good news. He was positively morose. Perhaps, she reflected, the evidence was pointing more and more towards Philippa.

Clara had quite recovered from her first wave of jealous anger. Indeed, the idea of a roman-

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tic attachment between the detective and his lovely hostess appeared, when soberly considered, as rather out of keeping with the character of the parties. The attachment might come, but as yet they were only friends. He was merely more demonstrative than she had believed, that was all. It followed that his courteous attentions to herself had meant less than nothing. Wrapped once more in her plain attire, the ex-schoolmistress had succeeded so far in repressing her emotions that neither her looking-glass nor her conscience any longer reproached her. Yet she was unhappy and had a sense of impending calamity.

Farlow had returned, and Philippa was more cheerful. If there was any connection between the two events no one seemed to notice it. Life at Ivy Towers—outwardly at least—was returning to tranquillity. If only McClue would do something besides mope and take long walks, with Yen Hui always following at his heels. The very sight of the Chinaman made her uncomfortable.

The rustle of a skirt broke upon Clara's reverie, and she looked up to see Minnie standing in the doorway.

"I'm looking for McClue," she announced, throwing herself upon the seat that circled the little interior.

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"He left this morning for the city," Clara replied. "He had some business there, but it will only take him a day or two, he told me."

"So, that was what the telegram meant that came for him this morning! It's all right, then. When I looked and couldn't find him it gave me quite a turn."

"Why?"

"Because—I've been talking with Lonny. We've made up again."

"You're quarreling over Olga?"

"No; we made that up the other night at dinner. This one was about you. Do you realize that you've been practically monopolizing him for the past two days?"

"How perfectly absurd!"

"That's what *he* says—that you didn't mean anything by it, but were just lonesome and dying for some one to talk to. So now I've come to make up with *you*—and to tell you something. Do you remember that time you asked for Mr. McClue at the door of the laboratory—a few hours before it blew up? Well, he was there all the time, asleep, and Lonny of course didn't want you to see him."

"I don't believe I understand."

"Why, your friend was drugged with morphia. The minute I heard about it I knew that he hadn't taken it intentionally. And

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since then I've learned that he let fall to Bol-lar that his lunch things were cleared away when he woke up. They were on the table in front of him when Lonny left, so somebody must have come in afterwards. It was Yen Hui, I'm almost sure. The infernal Chink probably saw him mussing with chemicals and jumped to the conclusion that it was he who poisoned the dog. That was why he was so anxious to get the things away—he'd done a little chemisting, himself. But McClue boasts of him as a model servant."

"But Minnie, Yen Hui is with him now. They went away together."

"Together?" Minnie was on her feet in an instant and dragging Clara towards the exit. "You must warn him at once. Do you know where he has gone? Where to send a telegram?"

"He'll be at his office, I think."

Clara was already in advance and running for the nearest telephone. It seemed hours before she got the connection, and then the best she could do was to leave a message. The Ferret had not yet arrived.

The rest of the day dragged interminably. No word came from the city, and visions of oriental cunning and cruelty haunted her imagination. McClue had started out in a machine with

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Yen Hui at the wheel. What might not have happened in that ride of thirty miles?

She began to realize the isolation of her position. Bollar's open approval, tactlessly obvious ever since she had warned him of Darehurst's plans, had made her connection with the detective or the police force generally felt. It made her something of a pariah. Also the salt-shaker and the box-lid had been missed—and traced to her, she felt. Anyway, Mrs. Childs and Rosalie were now openly hostile, and even Philippa seemed no more especially anxious for her company. As for the household in general, she might as well have worn one of those nickle badges, now so familiar about the corridors. A supposed penchant for collecting finger-prints never makes one a social favorite.

McClue had managed, somehow, to become popular in spite of his profession. And yet, as the news of his departure spread, something very much like a sigh of relief passed through the great mansion. Bollar and his assistants, after all, didn't count. The cat was away. It was time for the mice to play.

Clara noticed the change as she entered the dining-hall that evening. More candles than usual seemed to have been lighted upon the tables; and their soft radiance, tinted by crimson shades, with the gleam of rare china and the

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flash of silver, was like a decoration woven about the uncommonly elaborate toilets of many of the women present. The subdued murmur of voices, promising not to remain forever quite so subdued, and an occasional ripple of laughter, furnished an appropriate accompaniment. These gay Bohemians had moped long enough. The feeling of restraint had vanished from the air.

Philippa's table was full, Philippa, herself, Farlow, and even Darehurst having emerged from their retirement. But, apart from a few nods and the cordial welcome of the still faithful Minnie, Clara's arrival remained unnoticed.

She was too downcast to care or to pay much attention to her surroundings. Gaiety was, of all things, the least congenial to her mood. Yet she could not help glancing curiously now and then at the adjoining table where sat Olga Legrand in the most extravagant of evening gowns—a blazing affair of sequins, without sleeves, very low in the neck and patterned with dragons in the Chinese manner. Never had she seen Olga so weirdly superb, and it was evident that the Vampire was exerting herself to be fascinating. No one would have thought that she had recently lost a lover under tragic circumstances.

As dessert was served, Olga rose, swept mag-

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nificantly towards Philippa's table, and paused most unexpectedly behind Clara's chair.

"Come up to my apartment for coffee, will you, dear?" she stooped to whisper.

"You, too," she added, laying a hand on Minnie's shoulder. "I'm giving a little party, and we'll try to make you both more comfortable than you seem to be here."

"I should say we *would* come!" Minnie responded under her breath.

Clara would have preferred to refuse, but there was no opportunity, and her companion gave her no peace until they were standing before a door half hidden by tapestries on the fourth floor.

"I've never been in here before," Minnie chattered as she searched impatiently for the push-button, "but I've heard it's gorgeous. We're in for some goings on! Oh! There isn't a bell—it's a knocker. What do you know about that?"

A single tap gained them admittance, and Clara's purist soul rose in rebellion at the utter lawlessness of the luxury which met her eyes. Here was no period or prevailing style, but a medley of all styles—Chinese tables and chairs of teakwood inlaid with mother-of-pearl stand-on Turkish rugs and rubbing elbows with French statuary and grotesque images of Hin-

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doo workmanship. The tapestries were Persian, as were the brass lanterns that hung from the ornate ceiling, sending from the seemingly shapeless patterns cut into their sides curious figures of beasts and birds dancing over the walls. The general effect was oriental, but suggested a poorly lighted museum rather than a human habitation—until Olga, herself, came forward and extended a welcome with her outstretched hands. Then immediately the huge room with its jumble of designs and colors became a mere background, mysterious and voluptuous, against which her beauty stood out almost Cleopatra-like.

The girls were escorted to a seat in a deeply-cushioned recess, and served by servants in flowing silk robes. The coffee was Turkish—thick and sweetish, exhaling the aroma of a dozen unknown ingredients. Minnie lifted her cup to her lips with a rapturous sigh. Clara, however, was more inclined to use her eyes. She saw that most of the men were slipping off their coats and putting on loose-sleeved garments of embroidered stuffs, which made them, she thought, look perfectly ridiculous. Nearly everybody was smoking, many affecting the narghile, or water-pipe of the East, with its long, tubed mouth-pieces, which stretch from its squat body so like the tentacles of a squid. The air

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was also heavy with perfume, either from burning incense or from scented oil in the lantern. It was already difficult to breathe.

"We must each smoke a cigarette," advised Minnie, reaching for a heaping bowl that stood on a tabouret by her side. "It won't do to make ourselves conspicuous by being stand-offish."

"Light one, and I'll take a puff or two," Clara agreed. "Anything more would make me ill."

She had noticed with a sense of satisfaction that neither Philippa nor Darehurst were of the company, though Farlow was there and making himself very much at home. And now to her surprise Bollar appeared—to be greeted by Olga like an eagerly awaited and most important guest. The Chief's expression, at first strictly professional, softened to a condescending grin as he permitted himself to be piloted to a comfortable sofa, and became decidedly sheepish and flattered as his hostess openly petted him.

"Olga is up to something," Minnie cautiously observed. "I don't believe she is doing all this for fun."

Clara, letting a cigarette burn slowly between her fingers without touching her lips, was more and more inclined to agree. But as what sort of a place was Ivy Towers revealing itself, now that one looked at last beneath its surface?

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Never had she seen such a company, and never did she want to see such another. The men were becoming every moment more drowsy and indolent in their attitudes. The women permitted themselves to be caressed in a manner which made the little Puritan blush—but they seemed to do it as in a dream. The conversation was like the hum of tired bees, drunken with honey among too many flowers on a hot summer afternoon.

Clara leaned back and half closed her eyes, as so many others were doing; but every sense within her was alert. She had not touched her coffee, but emptied it with seeming carelessness into a vase of lilies at her elbow. Olga also, she fancied, was on the watch, and for a time Farlow. But the latter, after lighting a nargileh with his own hands and inducing Bollar to smoke it with him, grew inattentive to his surroundings, and both he and the Chief might have been asleep for all the signs of animation they displayed before the pipe was finished. Olga smiled the faintest, most enigmatical smile in the world, walked quietly to the rear of the room, lifted a portier and disappeared.

Clara rose and stole after her, observing that even Minnie had succumbed to nirvana. But the room beyond the portier was empty, though the scent of Olga's robe seemed still to linger in

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its pure fresh air. The exit to the corridor was locked, with the key in the door, but there was a circular stair in the corner, and an instant's calculation showed that it must lead to the card-room two stories below. Clara descended to the ground floor, discovering only darkness and emptiness. But here a door stood open to the grounds, and beyond could be caught a glimpse of a sequin-covered skirt gliding swiftly away through the trees. It disappeared suddenly, and then—after a long interval—emerged from the summer-house and turned squarely towards Long Island Sound.

Olga walked so rapidly that it was difficult to keep her in sight, and when Clara saw her pause before a tiny gate in the great, all-inclosing wall, and fumble in her dress as if for a key, it began to look as if the chase would be fruitless. Once that gate was locked behind her, the fugitive would be out of reach.

But in her haste she left the gate ajar, and in crossing the open ground which now presented itself Clara noticed for the first time that she carried a parcel of some sort under her arm. Trailing the quarry across the sandy beach required more caution than had been necessary among the shrubbery, and she kept her distance until Olga entered a boat-house close by the water's edge—the very boat-house McClue

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had hidden behind that morning when he found the grappling-iron. Clara crept up, stood on her tip-toes, and tried to look in at one of the windows. The interior was stygian. She could see nothing. But she fancied that she heard the rattling of a chain.

Vaguely alarmed, she moved towards the open, or Soundward end of the boat-house—just in time to see the pointed stem of a boat begin to glide forward. Only by crouching behind the corner post did she avoid observation as Olga appeared, skillfully manipulating a pair of oars and sending her craft towards deep water.

Opposite a point a few hundred yards down the beach and about a quarter of a mile out, was a small island, not more than a couple of acres in extent, and at this hour barely discernible. It was towards the island that Olga steered, battling determinedly with a cross-current which threatened to send her eastward with the outgoing tide.

Clara, uncertain at first of the rower's destination, followed along shore. She hated to abandon what had begun merely as a wild-goose chase, now that it promised to lead to something mysteriously important. Yet she could not swim after the boat, and to call out would be worse than useless. Only when the island began to reveal itself as the obvious objective did

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she think of exploring the boat-house for further resources.

Another boat was there, but securely fastened by padlock and chain. No sense but that of touch was available, and to break the chain with an oar for a lever was a considerable task. Several minutes were lost before she accomplished it and was herself skimming over the waters of the Sound. The first boat was now nowhere in sight, and she soon discovered that she was no such oarswoman as Olga. The cross-current seemed endowed with malignant purposes. At one moment its pull would be quite irresistible; then without any apparent reason it would let go its hold, as if the thing of wood which floated upon its surface were already its prey, to be played with a while and finally swallowed at a gulp.

About half way to the island, however, Clara was rewarded by seeing the outline of a hull emerge from the gloom ahead. It became more and more distinct; she was gaining upon it—no, it was coming towards her. But where was Olga? A person sitting in a row-boat should be more visible than the hull itself. Clara could not believe her eyes when—a favorable swirl of the tide assisting her to draw up alongside—she discovered that the other boat was empty. The night must be deceiving her, she thought. So,

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at imminent risk of capsizing, she abandoned her own craft and boarded the prize. That settled it. There was no other passenger.

It couldn't be Olga's boat, then. Olga certainly wouldn't maroon herself upon a lonely island. This was just an empty boat adrift upon the Sound, and coming from the Lord knew where.

An extremely unlikely hypothesis? But Clara could think of nothing better. The current was still against her—seemed to be against her no matter which way she turned. But she reached the island at last, landing at a tiny wharf which she blundered upon rather than found. Limited in extent as the island was and totally barren of everything save a short growth of grass, it seemed to have been sufficient to engulf Olga completely. Clara went over it yard by yard, calling her by name. There was no response.

"She couldn't have started for here after all," Clara at length told herself. "She must have slipped away after I lost sight of her, and landed at some place along the coast. I may as well go back."

But going back presented difficulties. The boat she had herself left at the wharf was no longer there.

Clara sat down on the edge of the little plat-

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form in utter weariness and vexation. To think that she had been so careless in fastening a chain that the only possibility in prospect was a night alone on the island! And how foolish she had been in even fancying that Olga Legrand was bound for such a desolate spot as this. What imaginable—

She paused in the midst of her musings. Upon the planking beside her lay a lady's wrap, covered with Chinese dragons embroidered in gold.

Olga had been there, then. But how had she got away? Once more Clara turned to scan the island, as if—having overlooked a wrap—it were possible to have overlooked a human being. And there, coming towards her, was the figure of a man. Even while her senses reeled at the sheer surprise of the event, she recognized the bearded Russian—Solovief.

“What are you doing here?” he began, reaching the platform and speaking in thick, guttural tones. “It is late for young ladies—what do you call?—to picnic.”

Clara felt a creepy sensation steal through her veins. Yet, as she had seen this man at Ivy Towers and knew that he had some sort of standing there, she was not as frightened as she would have been in the presence of a perfect stranger. In a way his coming was a relief.

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He must have a boat, and could take her back to the mainland. So she fought down a purely instinctive impulse to get up and run, no matter whither, and answered quietly:

"It is rather odd that you should be here, yourself. But since you are, you may as well escort me home."

"Wait!" Solovief stooped, caught up the wrap that still lay in Clara's hands, and examined it closely. "So! You have seen Miss Legrand."

"Yes," admitted Clara; "but I've lost sight of her. Where do you suppose she can be?"

"I am under much obligations," Solovief went on, squatting down on his heels so that his lips were not two inches from her ear. "You will now give me the package."

"The package?"

"Olga Legrand's package. You have seen her. It was to you she gave it."

"She did nothing of the kind."

"You will not give it up?"

"I can't. I couldn't if I wanted to. I only saw Olga at a distance, and—"

Clara never finished the sentence. The wrap had been thrown over her face and was tightening around her throat.

CHAPTER XIII

MC CLUE SEEKS "ANXIOUS"

THE Ferret did not lay claim to any of those well-nigh supernatural powers with which the unthinking public—and its servant, the press—love to endow the successful sleuth. But he was rather proud of his instinct—the knack of reaching just conclusions while the facts on which they were based were still too vague to be put into words; and in trusting himself to travel with Yen Hui he was not as artless as one might have supposed. Indeed, he felt quite certain that there was something radically wrong with his too perfect servant. Just what, he did not know, and he meant to devote at least a part of this trip to the task of finding out.

To set a man to driving an automobile is temporarily to disarm him. He must faithfully run the machine or be himself overtaken by disaster. McClue, lounging comfortably in the back seat, smiled as he noted how well Yen Hui understood his job, and how much less formidable he looked now that a simple blue livery had taken the place of his highly colored bro-

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cares. The orient appeals strongly to the imagination only in its native garb. It is difficult to believe that even a Chink can be unhumanly crafty when you see him wearing American clothes. And so, having much else to think about, the detective turned his mind—too completely than was perhaps wise—to more immediately important matters.

A telegram, signed "Anxious" and asking for an interview in McClue's own office, had been responsible for this sudden start for New York. The fake advertisement had borne fruit. And since it looked as if he were really to see this mysterious client, it was necessary to decide at once just what sort of a report should be made. So he took out a note-book and began jotting down certain features of the case in shorthand by way of experiment.

"We have to deal with a highly abnormal company of men and women, living in great luxury and supposed to be employed in elevating the artistic tone of the motion picture, who yet devote a part of their time to mounting cheap, sensational melodrama involving athletic feats.

"The leading lady appears to be utterly devoted to the leading man, and anxious only that no suspicion shall be cast on him. Yet she faints when a petal from her own wreath is found upon the victim's body.

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“The victim and the leading man are in the closest association, the one being understudy to the other; yet there is plenty of evidence that they were enemies. Alike in appearance, they appear to have been utterly different in the impression which they made upon acquaintances. Both were in love with the same woman, yet with such different results that one was favored and the other loathed.

“The leading man attempts to make a confession, and is much embarrassed when he discovers that he has not even guessed the weapon used in the murder; yet he is obviously relieved on learning that the bullet, the mere mention of which proved his statement a lie, is not in the hands of the authorities.

“The only person positively known to have rushed through the halls on the night of the murder is a skillful crook, notorious for his carefulness and cunning, yet three small articles are dropped on the floor—one of them of great value and all capable of making a noise.

“The leading lady is perfectly willing to admit that the diamond ring (above referred to) is hers, but is much perturbed by the alleged discovery of the mark of a ring upon one of the fingers of her left hand.

“There!” muttered the Ferret, completing his summary, “those are the items which inter-

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est me. But I suppose 'Anxious' will prefer hearing about the quarrel over the card game, my narrow escape from the ash-bin, the hysterics of the vampire, the piece of frontal bone with a semi-circle cut in its edge, Darehurst's attempt at escape and the disappearance of Chicago Mike."

Again he wrote:

"Note—The man I nearly caught sneaking through the front of the house about midnight was not the man Clara saw running through the upper hall at about two o'clock. My man must have been out of the house long before that."

Once more he began talking to himself:

"Those are the facts. I wonder if anybody else sees where they all tend to? And—by Jove. I've forgotten to mention my falling asleep in Lounsbury's laboratory and waking up with a sting in my arm."

He turned, as if about to say something to Yen Hui; but the machine, which for some time now had been threading its way through metropolitan traffic, at that moment came to a stop, and McClue found himself in front of his destination.

"Party arrived?" he asked, having been whisked by the elevator to an unpretentious office suite on the seventh floor and speaking to a keen looking young man at a desk.

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"Not yet, sir. You are early."

"Any information about the past history of those people I sent you the names of?"

"Not a line; but Joe is working on the job."

"Found Chicago Mike?"

"No; but the New York police are looking for him."

"And the Superba Film Corporation?"

"It is fairly well known among the profession," was the answer; "but most of its productions are considered freak—high-brow, you know. Splendid commercial credit, yet not feared by competitors."

"Where does its credit come from?"

"Townsend and Townsend, the attorneys. And they refuse all detailed information."

McClue grunted, and went into his private office. Townsend and Townsend were big fish, and giving out information was one thing for which they were not famous. Not many minutes later the card of George H. Townsend, senior member of the firm, was brought in—with the single word "Anxious" pencilled in one corner.

McClue rose to greet his visitor—a somewhat pompous gentleman, well past middle age—saw him comfortable in a chair, resumed his own seat behind a flat-topped desk, and waited.

"I saw your advertisement—am glad to hear

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that you are ready to make a preliminary report," the other began. "If I had been less overwhelmed with business I would have taken occasion before this—"

"Wouldn't it have been simpler to have given me your name in the first place?" McClue interrupted.

"Simpler, no doubt. But we thought it better not to appear until you had actually undertaken the case."

"We? Are you not the gentleman who signs himself 'Anxious'?"

"No; but I am his personal representative, and I hope—"

"Pardon me. But I can no longer consent to deal with anybody but the principal."

The attorney turned red with offended dignity.

"It was understood that you were to act without inquiring into that matter," he said. "And I thought, when I took the trouble to come here personally—"

The dry, legal voice broke off, as if silence, after all, were the best reproof.

"You thought," prompted the Ferret, smiling, "that I would appreciate the honor. And you may be certain I do. Everybody knows that the very important legal and financial interests served by a firm like Townsend and

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Townsend do not permit your frequent gadding about, calling upon poor devils of detectives. But the time has come when you must introduce me to your client."

"Impossible!"

"At least tell me his name."

"That is equally out of the question."

"But surely, Mr. Townsend, you read the newspapers?"

"Certainly," responded the lawyer, adopting a more conciliatory tone; "and I assure you that I was profoundly shocked on learning of the unfortunate incident which has taken place at Ivy Towers—to which, no doubt, you mean to refer. But I cannot see where it alters our contract. You must already have guessed that, in asking you to investigate the conditions there, the affairs of this—Estamps—were not exactly what one had in mind."

"But why didn't 'Anxious' tell me what he did have in mind? As it is, he has put himself in a rather unfortunate position."

Attorney Townsend waved the suggestion aside with a well-groomed hand.

"He is not worrying about that. And if he had told you his suspicions and they had proved to be unfounded—don't you see? He would have taken you unnecessarily into his confidence. But come! Let us get down to busi-

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ness. Your report, I understand, is ready."

"It is ready for Mr. 'Anxious.'"

"You refuse to make it to me?"

"I am afraid I must. And you persist in refusing me his name?"

"Certainly; it would be violating a confidence."

"I suppose you know I can have you subpoenaed, and compel you to testify—at the inquest?"

"You can have me subpoenaed, beyond question. Whether I would be compelled to testify remains to be seen."

"But man!" cried the Ferret, altering his mode of attack; "while you are standing on what may or may not be your technical rights, innocent people are in danger of being charged and perhaps convicted of a capital offense. Can't you see that it is your duty as a citizen and a human being to throw all possible light on this mystery? The facts show that your client had advance—and very probably guilty—knowledge of a murder."

"I shall consider my duty as a citizen overshadowed by my duty as an attorney until a court of competent jurisdiction has decided otherwise, Mr. McClue. But I can assure you that 'Anxious' has no knowledge, guilty or otherwise, of this unfortunate affair."

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The detective sat silent for a moment, studying his visitor carefully. Any further appeal to the human side of one so steeped in legal formulas was clearly useless. He well knew the reputation of Townsend and Townsend. They were engaged chiefly in business practice, seldom appeared in court, and while always keeping strictly within the letter of the law were said to be the advisers of some of the biggest and most unscrupulous interests in the country. An incident like the killing of a fellow being and the unjustifiable incarceration of another would appear to them as of trifling importance if it could not be laid at their door.

"Do you know the nature of the interest which 'Anxious' does take in affairs at Ivy Towers?" he asked finally.

"I do not," said the lawyer.

"Then how do you know that he has no guilty knowledge? If, since hearing of the murder, he is unwilling to disclose himself, even to me, it rather looks as if—"

"You are mistaken in your assumption, Mr. McClue. My client cannot possibly have heard of the murder."

"What! Not after several days—"

"No; he is so situated that the news can not have reached him, even after several days. I

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do not feel called upon to say more, but of that you may rest assured."

"Sick, out of his head, or at a distance and perhaps deprived of liberty—unless it's all a lie," said McClue to himself. Then to his visitor:

"Didn't you tell Mr. Farlow any more than you have told me—when you saw him the other day?"

"We have not seen Mr. Farlow within the month."

The Ferret repressed all signs of interest in this information, though Farlow had distinctly told him that his visit to the city had to do with matters connected with the company's finances.

"Well, I suppose you want your money back," he remarked casually.

"On the contrary, I hope you will go on with the case. We'll waive the preliminary report."

This George H. Townsend was a diplomatic loser, and reached for his check-book. McClue made a negative sign, and rose to his feet.

"As a matter of fact, you couldn't shake me off," he smiled crookedly. "But no more money, please. I'll claim my next reward when I have unearthed your client."

The rest of the day was spent in attending to accumulated routine matters; and though no

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time was wasted, even for lunch, the afternoon was nearly gone when he finally called Yen Hui from a near-by garage and started back for the Towers. This Mr. George H. Townsend was just a bit too dignified to be profoundly clever, and he had dropped one or two important facts after all. So absorbed did the Ferret become in thinking of them that he quite forgot his surroundings until the sudden jolting of the machine informed him that they had turned into a rough and unfrequented highway.

"Hey, Yen Hui!" he called. "Don't you know the way home? We never came this road."

"No come this away," admitted the driver without turning his head. "But him allee samee short-cut. Mist' Fallow velly often use."

"He does, does he? Well, maybe it's all right. But don't forget that you've got an American devil sitting behind you. He might shoot bad Chinaboy if he got sufficiently nervous."

"No bad Chinaboy. Home velly soon now."

And the machine sped on.

It was fully half an hour before anything further happened, and all the while the road grew more picturesque, with ever wilder and more densely wooded lands on either side. Not

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another vehicle did they meet. And then Yen Hui seemed to lose control. The steering wheel was jerked out of his hands by a particularly ugly rut; and the machine, after jouncing its way across a deep gutter and up a steep bank overgrown with wildflowers, crashed madly into a tree. It was not such an accident as would cause any serious damage to the occupants of the car—the speed had been just a little too slow for that. But it smashed one of the front wheels out of all semblance of further usefulness.

"Alle samee damn!" cried the Chinaman with a disconsolate look.

Twilight was already deepening, and it took two hours to repair the car, despite the fact that it carried an extra wheel. Yen Hui worked like a beaver, uttering a constant stream of self-reproaches, and McClue helped him—though in silence and with an eye upon his companion. But nearly everything seemed to have happened to the engine, and the sky was a pale streak between two black walls of vegetation by the time they were ready to resume the journey.

"I suppose I ought to drive," said the Ferret, as he climbed into the tonneau; "but both lamps are broken, and you must know the road better than I. Besides, if anything happens again, I'm going on the supposition that it happened

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on purpose. If you think you are a match for me in any fracas, Yen, just try it."

"Velly solly. Go caleful now."

"I dare say you will—and I won't get any dinner."

"You hungly? Have plenty biscuit, plenty hot coffee."

"What! Did you foresee this delay?" demanded McClue, watching with astonishment while his servant produced a thermos bottle and a pasteboard box from a cache under the seat.

"Always cally," said Yen Hui, resuming his place at the wheel but watching his passenger out of the corner of one slant eye. "Mist' Fallow always make cally plenty eat."

"Good idea!" The Ferret unscrewed the cap from the thermos bottle; and then, without waiting to use the cap for a cup, tipped the bottle to his lips.

The machine started forward, the Chinaman's eyes once more on the right of way. Fifteen or twenty minutes elapsed. Then they came to a branch in the road.

"Not velly sure which way go," said the driver, coming to a halt.

There was no answer from the back seat.

"You know which way turn?" he went on in a louder voice, twisting himself round and

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speaking with a distinct improvement in his English.

Still there was no answer, and with a noise very like a chuckle Yen Hui took a tiny flashlight from his coat pocket and set its beam playing over McClue's face. The detective lay sprawled almost at full length. His eyes were closed. He gave no sign of life.

"Plenty easy. Keep pig out late. Certain to take him bait."

The Chinaman spoke softly to himself; then took a small pick and a spade from a locked compartment in the back of the machine, and proceeded to dig a hole a short distance back from the road—a hole about six feet long and two feet wide. The sound of the implements working their way through the earth and occasionally clicking against a stone, was sinister in the extreme. The moon had not yet risen, and the stars gave to the whole scene the ghostly horror of an uncertain light—the same stars which at that very moment were looking down upon Olga Legrand and Clara Hope stealing across the lawns of Ivy Towers towards the summer-house.

"I say detective stay New York," Yen Hui confided to the night. "Then I go back China. Nobody know."

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He approached the prostrate form in the automobile and stooped, ready to take it in his arms and carry it to the terrible bed which he had prepared. But suddenly he became rigid, as if turned to stone. It was not so dark that he could not see that was looking into the muzzle of an automatic.

"Yen Hui," said the voice of McClue, "you didn't watch quite close enough while I handled that thermos bottle. I unscrewed the cap, but I didn't take out the cork."

CHAPTER XIV

THE SECRET OF THE SOUND

McCLUE was rather late in getting down to breakfast. He had confided Yen Hui to the tender keeping of Police Headquarters in New York, where friendly officials, knowing the Ferret's methods and learning that a few days of strictly solitary confinement might be good for the Chinaman's health, winked and were ready to oblige. But all this took time, and when Ivy Towers was reached at last it was long past midnight. He still had the keys intrusted to him during Farlow's absence, and managed to get in and put the car away without attracting attention. But on reaching his room he decided that he had had a hard day. So he let the clock slip around to nine before descending to his favorite table overlooking the lawns.

"Has Miss Hope been served?" he asked the waiter.

"No, sir. I haven't seen her this morning, sir."

"That's strange. She's usually an early

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riser. But perhaps she's having breakfast upstairs with Philippa Bell."

"Miss Bell," the waiter volunteered, "was down more than half an hour ago. But nearly everybody is late. There was something of a party here last night, sir."

"The deuce!" McClue's glance ran uneasily about; then it brightened. Minnie Deyo was coming towards him across the grounds.

She broke into a run when she saw him, bounded up the steps of the porch and dropped out of breath into the chair opposite.

"Send the waiter away," she whispered.

McClue gave the orders for two breakfasts with studied carelessness.

"What is it?" he demanded, when the servant had put himself out of earshot. "What is wrong?"

"Clara is missing," gasped Minnie, choking back a nervous sob. "We were to have slept together in Philippa's suite, but I was up late and didn't want to disturb her. So I slept in my old room. And this morning she wasn't—her bed hadn't been slept in. I've been looking for her everywhere. I thought you'd never come down."

"Have you told anyone of this?"

"No; when I went to get her to come for breakfast I met Philippa, and she asked me

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where we'd spent the night. I let her think Clara had been with me. But you take it rather cool."

"Cool? You must be losing your mind. But try to speak as if what you were saying was of no importance. When and where exactly did you see Clara last?"

Minnie described the scene in Olga's oriental drawing-room, and how they had started to spend the evening there.

"We were sitting side by side on a sofa," she went on, "and all of a sudden my eyelids got so heavy that I couldn't hold them open. The next thing I knew it was after midnight, and Clara was gone. I thought she had got tired and gone to Philippa, so I went right to bed."

"Had you had refreshments?"

"I drank a cup of coffee and smoked a cigarette. And then I fell—it wasn't asleep, exactly, but in a kind of excitement. I thought I was dreaming and having a wonderful time. It didn't seem five minutes—and yet it seemed ages. Do you suppose—?"

"Of course. Somebody is fighting fire with fire. Sounds more like *cannabene* than opium this time. If it was in the cigarette it might have been the hemp itself."

"*Cannabene?*"

"It's a volatile oil extracted from Indian

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hemp—the plant used in making haschisch. But did you notice nothing of what was going on around you?”

“I did at first. Mr. Bollar was there, and Olga made a great fuss over him. You’d have thought it was somebody taming a bear. Mr. Farlow was there, too. I saw him and Mr. Bollar start to smoke out of the same pipe. Everybody was beginning to cut up in a way that was simply scandalous. The Chief tried to dance, and the last I remember of Mr. Farlow he looked as if he was in a trance.”

“Farlow? Are you sure?”

“He looked that way.”

“Then—have you seen Olga this morning?”

“No, and I’ve heard several folks inquiring for her. You think she—?”

“Yes, I think she was the one who handled the dope. She wanted you all temporarily out of the way. Clara must have known better than to drink the coffee or to smoke. She followed Olga somewhere. We’re on the track at last.”

McClue rose hastily, and at the door of the dining-hall nearly collided with Bollar.

“I’m worried nearly to death,” the perspiring official began. But the Ferret cut him short.

“I know all about it. You smoked a nargileh in Olga Legrand’s apartment last night, and

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after that there are several hours which you can't account for. And this morning you can't find Olga anywhere, nor Clara Hope."

"Clara Ho—!"

"Yes; and it remains to be seen whether Solovief—"

"But Solovief wasn't there last night," gasped the Chief, overwhelmed by this sudden torrent of information.

"Gentlemen, I know what you are discussing."

Both wheeled at the sound of this new voice, and found themselves facing Farlow.

"I am even more distressed than you are," continued Farlow, joining the group, "for I can't help blaming myself for what has happened."

"What did *you* have to do with it?" asked McClue and Bollar in a breath.

"Just this. I went to Miss Legrand's apartment last evening, suspecting that something was wrong, and failed to take either of you into my confidence. Also I failed to keep as alert as I had intended. For several weeks I have had reason to think that narcotics were being used here, and that Olga Legrand was at the head of a sort of coterie who were secretly smuggling the stuff in under my very nose. I thought I would play the spy. I avoided the

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coffee and in smoking a nargileh I was careful to fill it with my own tobacco. But someone tricked me. I hadn't taken more than three or four puffs—"

"We are wasting time," cut in McClue. "Clara and Miss Legrand are both gone. Does either of you know of any way they could have gotten outside the grounds? Have the grounds themselves been searched?"

"I've had my men everywhere," answered the Chief, "and just before I came to look for you they found a little gate unlocked down at the end of the back gardens, with the key in the grass."

Hurriedly the three set out for the gate in question. The spot was deserted. But quite a crowd had collected about the boat-house just beyond.

"One of the boats is gone," reported a policeman, saluting Bollar. "It was pried loose from its staple."

"There's two gone," corrected Bollar, arriving where he could see the single craft that remained. "I was down here yesterday, myself, and there was three, then. Look! Here's the end of one of their chains where it was broken off."

"Yes, there were three," corroborated the Ferret; "*The Spotlight, The Philippa, and The*

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Ophelia. *The Philippa* belongs to the broken chain. *The Ophelia* was in the berth there where the staple has been drawn. *The Spotlight*, you notice, has both chain and padlock intact. That means—”

He stopped, and stood staring at the boat before him, a look in his face which indicated a sudden and almost ferocious emotion. But nobody noticed, all eyes being turned towards Bol-
lar, who had procured a key from Farlow and was releasing *The Spotlight* preparatory to taking her out. Not until one of the policemen was about to seat himself at the oars did McClue awake from his painful reverie. Then he abruptly shoved forward.

“I’ll search the island for you, Chief. There’s no use in any one else going. Send your men up and down the coast, and telephone to the neighboring towns along the water. I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

There was that in the Ferret’s eyes which compelled obedience, and the Chief had hardly time to recover his mental equilibrium before *The Spotlight* was off.

The island was completely deserted—a mere glance showed that. But McClue took pains to make sure that it had no secret caves or other hiding-places. Once he stooped and picked up a bit of blue-and-gold thread; once he scooped

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up a handful of gravel, examined it carefully and dropped several of the stones into his pocket. The ground nowhere was of a character to show footprints; grass, rocks, without even the suggestion of a beach, the island occupied him less than a quarter of an hour.

Returning to the mainland, he avoided the crowd and dragged the boat up on the sands near the confines of the estate, working in feverish haste and displaying the prodigious strength of a man totally absorbed in some all-compelling idea. Walking eastward, he passed Minnie without even seeing her.

The Sound! The Sound! What dark mystery was hidden in its depths? That was the thought which occupied him. His eyes never left the rippling surface that smiled with such mocking cheerfulness in the morning sunlight. He had gone through the village and was entering again upon a region of large private residences, when he caught sight of a couple of boys in a punt making laboriously for the shore—a prize in tow.

“What have you got there?” he hailed them.

“*The Ophelia*, seven days out from Ivy Towers, taken in fair fight on the high seas,” responded one of the urchins. “Wait till we beach our own vessel, Mister, if you’re lookin’

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to ransom her. Give another pull, Ike. There!"

He leaped out as he spoke, and with his companion dragged the punt well aground.

"Where did you find her?" demanded McClue, examining *The Ophelia* minutely.

"We didn't mean to steal her," protested the boy, frightened, and beginning to back away. "We was just foolin' around, playin' pirate. But we was goin' to take her home—honest, we was."

"Far be it from me to question a pirate's word," said McClue, seeing that the quickest way of winning the confidence of the boys was to fall in with the spirit of their play. "Here be two pieces of eight for you and your crew. Now answer my questions."

"Well, sir," responded the leader of the buccaneers, eagerly pocketing one of the coins and handing the other to his companion, "she'd fouled her stern on a sand bank a piece out from here, if you want to know, and was just bein' brought off by the turn of the tide."

"All right. Now help me fasten her up. And then you and your mate get ye gone upon another cruise. There be many galleons with precious freight lying at the mercy of freebooters off this part of the Spanish main."

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"Yeh really mean they's another one loose?"

"I think so. And if you find it I'll give you not only two dollars, but four."

The boys set out with pirate shoutings just as Minnie came up.

"Have—have you found anything?" she faltered.

"Nothing but one of the boats."

"Then one of them landed here?"

"No, those boys found it stuck stern first in a shoal. If the other one was cast adrift, too, it must have gone farther."

"Why should either have been cast adrift, Mr. McClue?"

"God knows. But—is anything new the matter? You look as pale as a ghost."

"Yes; I've something awful to tell you. Peter—one of the servants from the house—overtook me just now. He was looking for you, and I promised to deliver his message. He says—in *The Spotlight*, after you left it, he noticed—he thinks they are blood-stains, and look as if they had been hastily washed—"

"I know—I saw them," broke in McClue. "All three of those boats were out last night, Minnie. But what's this? The boys are rowing back."

"Yeh see that feller in a motor-boat?" cried

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the chief pirate, pointing to a voyager who was churning off towards Long Island.

"Yes. What about him?"

"He's found the other boat—*The Philippa*, he says it is. Yeh promised us four dollars. What do we git for puttin' you on the track?"

"Here's five dollars to divide between you." McClue took out a bill, wrapped it about a pebble and tossed it skillfully into the approaching punt.

"Well, then—and thanks, Mister!—he didn't find it himself, exactly. But he says it's been picked up just this side of Cos Cob. And they was a body in it, he says. Gee! They's been another murder—a woman, he says. You don't suppose that we—"

But McClue, with Minnie by his side, was already running toward the police station. An ambulance was drawing up when they arrived, and a grewsome little sign indicated that the morgue was in the same building.

"Shall I go look?" asked Minnie, laying her hand on McClue's arm as he hesitated to approach a stretcher which was being lifted out of the ambulance.

Taking his silence for consent, she darted forward and boldly lifted a corner of the canvas covering.

"It's an awful thing to say," she choked, com-

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ing back with less steady steps, "but—but thank God—it's Olga."

"Thank God with all my heart," murmured McClue, sustaining the mouse-like figure that now stood sobbing within his arms.

Inquiry developed the fact that the body had not been found in *The Philippa*, but adrift by itself, the mere coincidence that both had been discovered at about the same time being responsible for the rumor picked up by the boys. It was easily established also that the man in the motor-boat was an innocent outsider, who happened to be starting for a morning's cruise when the news was first brought in.

The detective entered the morgue just as the physician, having examined what death had left of the unfortunate film star, was giving his opinion.

"There is practically no water in the lungs, but there are plenty of blue marks about the throat. The woman had already been strangled into unconsciousness before she was thrown into the Sound."

"But she wasn't wounded?" asked McClue.

"I didn't say so," returned the physician somewhat stiffly, "but that is correct, if by a wound you mean an actual breaking of the tissues. The body hasn't lost a drop of blood."

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"Then this trail ends right here. I must go back to the Towers and start over again."

McClue spoke as if to himself. He had not even noticed that Farlow and Bollar were present.

"Come back in my car," the former now suggested. "I brought the Chief down, but there is plenty of room for you and Miss Deyo, too."

The Ferret accepted curtly. It occurred to him for the first time that the Superba's director, in his eternal frock coat and gloves, looked too much like an undertaker.

Just as they were ready to start, the pirates once more hove in sight and begged to be taken along. They could ride on the foot-board they insisted, and would take up no room at all. Bollar ordered them off, but McClue suddenly interfered.

"Let them come," he decided. "Sometimes a boy's eyes are better than a man's. But for God's sake, Farlow, step hard on the gas. It's nearly noon already."

The crowd about the boat-house was larger than ever when they arrived, but having learned that there was no news McClue started towards the Towers alone.

"You must *think*, you fool!" he growled sav-

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agely to himself. "Think, and not act like a girl. Three boats, one of them blood-stained; one body found, but no wounds; Clara missing. There must be some solution of the mystery besides the one I am afraid of. In that third boat—it lies there."

"The third boat shows that somebody came back," piped a voice in his ear.

"Of course—everyone knows that." The Ferret fairly snapped at the little Mouse, who had followed in his wake. But she persisted:

"Then if Clara was hurt she is here somewhere, not in the water."

"Why, yes."

"And there might have two come back in that one boat, and maybe it was the *other* one that was hurt."

"Good girl, Minnie! You've got it. That's what I was trying to reason out. And wounded or not, Clara must be somewhere near. The Towers is an awful rookery, and has only been searched by Bollar. There are plenty of nooks and corners—"

He paused. They had reached the lane in which he had found himself on the occasion of his release from the ash-pit by Mrs. Childs, and Philippa was standing by the very door through which he had come out.

"Have—have you found my little Christie

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Johnson?" she asked, in a voice that sounded half insane.

McClue, without waiting to reply, dashed for the kitchen, where he confronted Mrs. Childs.

"Give me the keys!" he ordered.

"What is it now?" The sad-eyed woman looked for once merely like the traditional housekeeper, tried beyond her patience by the disorder of her menage. "Such goings on! And all the servants neglecting their work. I never—"

"The keys!" reiterated the Ferret.

"What keys?"

"The keys of the cellars, coal-bins, sub-cellars—"

"You're not master here," the woman interrupted with a flash of anger. "Mr. Farlow happens to have returned. Go and ask him—"

But McClue, catching sight of a large bunch of keys hanging at her girdle, cut the colloquy short by snatching them, wrenching them free with a jerk, and departing like a shot for the alley door.

Philippa had gone, but Minnie was still waiting, and—leaving her on guard—the detective entered the long, dark passage where he had once so nearly been done to death by a treacherous fall of coal. A moment later he emerged, a senseless bundle in his arms.

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"Bound, gagged, hidden in the ash-bin—and probably drugged," he ground out beneath his teeth. "But she isn't dead."

"Is it really Clara?" Gazing in horror at the stained and disfigured face, Minnie could hardly believe her eyes.

"Yes, yes. She was left in there to die. But take the keys back to Mrs. Childs and make her believe that we discovered nothing. *Make* her—do you understand?"

Minnie was gone before he had finished speaking, and he succeeded in reaching the laboratory and laying his burden gently down among the ruins without encountering anyone. There Minnie joined him, with a favorable report of her interview with the housekeeper; and soon—having found the tap undamaged—they had washed the grime from Clara's face and released the last of her bonds.

"Not a cut anywhere," breathed McClue; "no serious concussions. And she's coming to."

Clara, in fact, moaned softly and opened her eyes. A look of fright gradually gave place to recognition as she saw who was bending over her, and the ghost of a smile stirred the outline of her lips.

"The package!" she murmured. "He followed me for the package."

"Who? What package?"

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"The Russian. Olga's package. But I didn't have it. And she—his hands were all covered with blood."

"Solovief! Olga fought and wounded him," cried McClue. "That's plain enough. Minnie, I must go, but let nobody else come near her—nobody, mind. The danger isn't over yet."

Clara had closed her eyes again, and Minnie was left to her solitary watch.

About the boat-house the crowd was thinning. News of the finding of Olga's body so far away had robbed the place of much of its grim fascination for the idly curious. The boys were still there, but as they watched the Chief of Police blindly poking about for clues and obviously finding none, their youthful imaginations, accustomed to the more exciting life of the lawless seas, began to wander. They even descended to a game of tag, and after that decided to discover whether or not it was feasible to reach the boat-house roof if one stood on the other's shoulders. The experiment was delayed by a dispute as to which should climb and which play the more laborious part of furnishing the shoulders. But finally the stronger won the point, and was soon safely over the eaves.

"Say! Come down and let me git up," stormed the loser from below.

But there was no answer. The roof was flat,

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but nobody had thought to climb it before, and the victor was making the most of his opportunity for exploration. When his face did reappear, he addressed—not his late companion but Bollar.

“Look here, Captain! The other gent give me seven dollars for findin’ a boat and tellin’ him about a guy that found another. What’re *you* goin’ to give me if I find somethin’ for you? It ain’t a boat, but—”

“Hey! Get down off that roof!” bawled the Chief. “And hustle off the place, too, both of you. I ain’t got no time to be bothered with kids.”

“But he *has* found something,” interposed Lounsbury, coming up. “He’s hiding it behind his back. Here, sonny. I’ll be your banker this time.”

“Will yeh make it two bucks?”

“Right!”

“What is it?” demanded McClune, reaching the photographer’s side just as the package dropped.

Lounsbury found himself grasping a paper-wrapped cylinder, about a foot long and two inches in diameter.

“Why, it’s Olga’s!” he whispered; “—something she left with me to keep for her—in the laboratory—the day it was blown up.”

CHAPTER XV

THE FILM

“**T**HIS is what comes of a misunderstanding!”

The Ferret, Bollar and the photographer sat facing each other about the library table, the cylindrical package lying still unopened between them. The Ferret had secretly removed Clara to a place of safety. The pirates had been paid and sent home, under the impression that their find was only a roll of old newspapers and the latest addition to their pieces of eight pure alms. But in the library there was an air of tension.

“I felt certain from the first that the explosion in the laboratory was an attempt to destroy something which Olga had hidden,” McClue continued. “Later, I even guessed that she had succeeded in removing it to the summer-house. But I was looking for an object shaped like a tambourine, and paid no attention to holes and crevices which might have held a cylinder. Mr. Lounsbury, you certainly took a great deal upon yourself when you kept your

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information from me. I know you resented my having deceived you as to my profession. But I thought I had convinced you that I was justified. If you had but mentioned a cylindrical—”

“You did convince me,” put in the photographer, flushing. “When we parted company was considerably later.”

And with painful embarrassment he proceeded to recall the incident of the detective’s untimely nap and the conclusion he had been forced to draw.

“So, *that* was it!” exclaimed the Ferret. “You saw me fall asleep—of course. And—did you give me a hypodermic? Was that the sting in my arm?”

“Atrophene.”

“I might have known. But the last thing a sober man would ever think is that he is being mistaken for a hop-head.”

He explained how the drug had been in some way insinuated into his food through no fault of his own, and Lounsbury, mortified by his error but glad to get back a friend, extended a repentant hand. Amity was restored. But the unfortunate results of their estrangement remained. Olga had taken the package from the summer-house, and—suspecting herself to be followed—had tossed it on to the roof of the boat-house and started for the island in hopes

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of making a false trail. Of that much the Ferret felt certain. He had found blood-stained gravel and a blue and gold thread—evidence enough of her visit and of somebody else's visit, too.

"But what are you going to do now?" asked the photographer, as McClue got up and began draping the heavy curtains over the window.

"That's what I'd like to know," complained the Chief of Police. "It's most time someone remembered that I'm an officer of the law. What are you up to? What's in this infernal package, anyway?"

"Lounsbury," said McClue, "do you think we can convert this place into a dark-room? Will you be able to develop a picture in here?"

"Why, yes. Anyway, that big closet over there would be dark enough. Most of my stuff has been destroyed, but I could get together—you don't suppose this is a film, do you? The shape—"

"The more I think about Olga Legrand the more I realize how little we did her justice," interrupted the detective. "Of course it's a film—one that has been unwound from its drum and re-wrapped about a roll of paper, I fancy. Changing the shape of the package was a stroke of genius. She realized that she was fighting against an extraordinary and subtle mind—one

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capable of suspecting what she had done and looking everywhere for the evidence of it. That same mind is now against us, gentlemen. Remember that."

"A film?" repeated Bollar, vaguely.

"Yes; one that she exposed in the camera in the card room. I was so near that I even heard the clicking of her machine, though I never guessed what it was. She was turning the handle very slowly—a little variation which threw me off. The picture will be 'speeded up,' as they say. But you know how bright those panchroma arcs were?"

"They didn't come on till after the crime was committed."

"What matter? She must have caught some little incriminating act of someone present which none of us were quick enough to see. Otherwise there wouldn't have been such extraordinary attempts made to destroy the record."

"If she took a picture with that camera in the card-room," affirmed Lounsbury with signs of growing excitement, "she may have got something much more remarkable than that. There is a shipment of chemical supplies that has never been unpacked. I don't think it was injured. But we'll need three new wooden pails

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and a lot of water. Can you send for them? I'll explain when I come back."

The photographer rushed off, and McClue decided to do his share of the errands in person and without waiting to ask questions. Bollar was left alone until Lounsbury reappeared, carrying two pasteboard cartons which he declared to contain fiber and developer, respectively. He would say nothing more, but busied himself in emptying the closet of a great pile of books and other rubbish. The job was completed long before McClue returned—with the pirates, three pails and an abundant supply of water.

"I had to go to the village," he explained, dismissing his aids; "for the pails, that is. The water we took from a faucet on this floor. Nobody paid any attention. That's the advantage of having boys along. I would have bought a red lantern only I was afraid it might give us away. Do you think you can manage?"

Lounsbury assured him that the ticklish part of the developing could be done in the dark.

"All right," said the Ferret, carefully locking the doors. "But before we go any further please tell us what you meant by saying that Olga may have caught something much more important than I supposed?"

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The photographer, who had already broken open the package enough to expose a layer of black "film wrapper," paused on his way to the closet.

"Do you remember the article you were reading in here—that day we first met?"

"The article on invisible light?"

Lounsbury nodded. But Bollar looked from one to the other, as if for signs of an untimely joke.

"Invisible *what?*" he finally exploded.

"Light," repeated Lounsbury. "There is lots of light we don't see, Chief. All that comes from beyond the red end of the spectrum is invisible because the vibrations are too slow for the eye; and all that comes from beyond the violet end are too fast. I've been experimenting with ultra violet on the quiet for a long time. One of the panchromas in the tower room wasn't a panchroma at all, but a mercury-vapor lamp with the globe coated with a thin deposit of metallic silver. The switch in the card-room was set to operate only that lamp, and the lens in the camera wasn't glass—it was quartz. Do you understand?"

"I *don't*," said Bollar, tersely.

"Why, ultra violet light won't go through glass," explained the photographer, "so you have to use quartz. And while an ordinary mer-

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cury-vapor lamp gives out all kinds of light, metallic silver cuts off everything but the invisible rays. The tower room might seem to be dark, and yet be literally flooded with ultra violet which only the eye of the camera would see."

"You mean one could be after takin' a picture when—"

"Exactly—when there wasn't a glim, or only what came in through the window, which on such a stormy night as that would be mighty little."

"Limited to what came from the few ordinary arcs which are kept burning all night on the grounds," supplemented McClue. "There is none very near the tower—about enough to see your hand before your face, I should say."

"Then she may have photographed the murder!"

"If she turned on the mercy vapor—yes," said Lounsbury.

He entered the closet, and could be heard splashing about with the chemicals. After a few moments he came out, carrying one of the pails.

"There! It's in the developer now—no further danger of its getting light-struck so long as we keep the curtains drawn. But don't ex-

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pect too much. Invisible photography is still in its infancy. It's slow, for one thing. I've had lots of failures since I set up that camera in the card-room."

"Why was it in the card-room and not in the laboratory?" asked McClue, bending over the pail and vainly peering at the loose coil of submerged celluloid ribbon for some sign of appearing images.

"Because we used to shoot a good many scenes from there, and it attracted no attention. I admit, too, that there were a good many queer goings on in this house at night. I wanted to catch something interesting. But I never did."

Lounsbury agitated the liquid and finally lifted a section of film into view. It was a crucial moment. Three heads crowded together, while he slipped the long strip rapidly through his fingers.

"She has caught *something*," cried McClue. "Look at those blotches. If it wasn't so infernally dark in here."

"Yes; I see. But we've got to wait."

The photographer returned the negative to the liquid, and little was said during the remainder of the developing, fixing and washing process. The water had to be changed; there was much surreptitious tip-toeing through the corridor to and from the neighboring wash-

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room. But Lounsbury finally flung back the curtains and announced himself satisfied, though the others could make but little of the tiny figures, on squares no larger than a postage stamp, which he held between them and the light.

"We must hang it up to dry," he said. "I've no apparatus, and it will take hours. Then I'll have to make a positive and hunt up a projecting machine. It's a night's work. You folks had better get your dinner."

McClue shook his head. He would neither trust himself to eat a mouthful nor to take his eyes off the film until the job was complete.

"Somebody may be getting wise by this time," he declared. "Another dose of morphia, or a rap on the head—no, thank you. I'm going to stick."

And stick he did, with Bollar heroically keeping him company, while the last traces of daylight faded from the landscape without and the night waxed and waned. Lounsbury was everywhere, and reported no unusual commotion of any sort among the household. Few could have noticed the finding of the package on the boat-house roof, and even with these it had passed for the idle play of a couple of boys.

McClue was elated when the time at last came for throwing the picture on a sheet pinned

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against one of the library walls. In all his career he had never assisted at such a strange performance. It was uncanny. A voice called back from the dead would not have been more startling than that first glimpse of a human form taking shape upon the screen.

It was Estamps, pacing up and down before the window in the tower room. Olga, no doubt, had suspected a rendezvous with some other woman, and had known enough about Lounsbury's experiments to jump at the chance of recording it. Estamps was clearly waiting for somebody. His every move suggested ill-controlled impatience, not to say fury. But surely it was no lover's tryst.

An instant later a shadowy Darehurst appeared, carrying a sword in his hand and moving uncertainly, like a man following a suspicious noise heard in the night and unable clearly to see his way.

"He was lured there!" muttered McClue. "I'm beginning to see the plot, from the trumped-up quarrel over the cards to the end, though probably we'll never know the details. Estamps was already jealous. He was made to think that his enemy had added insult to injury by dealing an extra ace. Somehow he was led to expect Darehurst, or perhaps both Darehurst and Philippa. Darehurst was drawn to the spot

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by one of those people who were wandering around the corridors that night. It was hoped that he would be killed—that Estamps would mistake his rush at a supposed burglar for a premeditated personal attack.”

The figures on the screen had already begun to fight, Darehurst defending himself with the sword. Estamps was pressed back towards the stair-head, and threw up his hands as if in surrender. Darehurst let the sword fall to his side. It was a mistake. Instantly Estamps drew a knife from his belt and was upon him.

Thus far the picture had been fairly clear, though moving jerkily like a cinematograph of twenty years ago. But as a third party stole upon the scene there were evidences of Olga's increasing excitement. What a woman, anyway, to have let her lover fight it out with his enemy and never interfere! Had she been so certain that he would win? Or had she been held back by the spirit of fair-play? Perhaps it had been too dark for her to understand what was going on. Now, however, she began to turn the crank too rapidly. In the reproduction, of course, the effect of this fault was reversed, and the figures seemed to crawl, while the under-exposure of the film reduced them to mere ghosts. But it could be made out that the newcomer wore a beard.

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"Solovief!" cried Bollar. "If I could once lay my hands on that fellow—"

He ceased abruptly, held breathless by the drama that was being played before him. Estamps had won an advantage in the struggle. His right arm was free. The knife—now recognizable as a dagger—was descending. And though the spectators knew that the outcome had been otherwise, it was almost impossible not to believe that Darehurst was about to be killed.

The interference came from Solovief, who at the decisive instant drew his revolver and fired from behind Darehurst's back. Estamps staggered, retreated a step, lost his balance and disappeared into the depths of the stairway.

"You see," said McClue, "the Russian mistook his man in the dark. He meant to save Estamps, not to kill him. Of that I'm certain. But what is this?"

Darehurst was standing motionless as if paralyzed by surprise, and Solovief had rushed beyond the field of the lens. But a woman was coming forwards. She started as she saw Darehurst, hid her face in her hands and turned to run. He looked towards her just in time to see her going. But the film was wretched. The woman's face could not be made out.

"Olga altered the focus here," groaned

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Lounsbury. "But—it looks like Philippa, don't you think?"

"It was Philippa," answered the Ferret. "She recognized Darehurst and he thought he recognized her. This accounts for their suspecting each other the way they have. And here she is coming back to make sure."

This time there could be no mistake. Olga had corrected the focus. It was Philippa Bell beyond a doubt.

"My God! I was afraid of this," exclaimed the Chief. "The only one in the outfit I really like."

"Olga was afraid of it, too," said Lounsbury. "I might as well tell you. She came to me a few days ago and wanted me to teach her photography. I see now—she wanted to develop the film, herself."

"I see—and cut Philippa out of it," supplemented McClue. "Olga was true blue and no mistake. I wish you had told me this before. But it's strange, if she didn't understand photography, how she could have managed the camera as well as she did."

"She must have learned from watching me—and she didn't manage it very well. I have made a non-inflammable positive and am varying the projection all the time to keep pace with her, or we wouldn't get the sense of anything."

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Philippa's image had gone while Lounsbury was speaking; Solovief's had reappeared, snatched up Darehurst's abandoned sword, and was hacking at something within the stairway.

"What's he doing?" demanded Bollar.

"Destroying the evidence of the bullet hole," said the Ferret. "He's wearing gloves—I found traces of them on the handle! Look! He is after the ladder. But this is not going to show us why it was put there."

To an eye unaided by a previous guess at the truth, it looked as if the Russian was after a rug, for he slipped out of the picture in the direction of the card-room, and returned carrying a rug in his hands. It showed a close call for Olga—a moment when she might easily have been discovered. But Solovief stepped out on the balcony, and after an interval which McClue knew had been devoted to fixing the rug over the rail to prevent scratches, reappeared dragging the ladder after him. At the same moment a woman's form was once more visible. It was not Philippa's this time, but somebody of stouter build. This much could be made out. But the exhaustion of Olga's stock of nerve was beginning to be painfully evident. She had turned at all sorts of speeds, the focus varied like mad, and it looked as if the whole camera had been rocked to and fro by a gale. The new

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face on the screen remained a blur. All that could be seen was that the woman stepped up to Solovief and seemed to catch him by the beard. Instantly he was transformed into a man with a shaven face. But his image was so dim that it accorded no clew to the true identity which had been hidden beneath his disguise.

He went off carrying the ladder. The woman brought in the rug. After that she stood for a moment in the middle of the picture, wringing her hands—unfortunately with her back to the camera. Finally she wheeled about, lifting her arm as if to ward off some seen or imagined horror, and rushed away.

“Accessory after the fact—that’s the woman we want,” almost shouted the Chief of Police. “Can’t you give us a clear look at her somehow?”

Lounsbury shook his head. The film was suddenly well-defined. McClue, himself, was seen to cross the tower room, and after him Clara Hope and a host of others.

“Here is where you heard the machine, Mac. The panchromas are on. It’s the end of the film. We’ll have to call it a failure, I’m afraid.”

“It’s worse nor a failure,” Chief Bollar lighted a cigar and blew a puff of smoke discontentedly into the air. “We know now that Sol-

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ovief wears a disguise, but we don't know what he looks like when he's himself. And the only other one we can be after swearin' to that we weren't certain of already, is Philippa Bell. I'll *have* to arrest her now."

"No, you won't," put in McClue, who had been turning on the lights.

"Who says so?"

"I do."

The Chief rose with dignity to his feet.

"I've stood a good deal, Ferret—and I know you've got the bulge on me in one or two points. But when it comes to dictation, with three murders and nobody pinched—"

"Two murders and two pinches," corrected the Ferret. "It may interest you to know that Clara Hope is safe in a room upstairs. I didn't tell you because I wanted everybody to see that you were still looking for her, and you act better when you believe in your part. I also thought it better to keep it out of the newspapers that Yen Hui and a gentleman known as Chicago Mike are under lock and key. But under lock and key they are, and their testimony is going to surprise you.

"As to the film," he went on, addressing Lounsbury, while Bollar stood gasping, too astonished to speak; "as to the film, I don't think we need call it a failure after all. It has told

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us just how Estamps was killed. We couldn't identify some of the figures, but I can give a mighty good guess at who they are. All we want is legal proof. And if you both will put yourselves at my disposal, I have a scheme which I think will give us that."

CHAPTER XVI

THE PLAY IN "HAMLET"

THE rank and file of the Superba Film Company, the supers, the servants, and most of their friends and acquaintances in the village, were in a whirl of pleasurable excitement. Ivy Towers, with its conservatories, its swimming-pools, its gymnasium and other luxurious conveniences, was not lacking in a tiny theatre; and to this they were all invited—to attend "*a dramatic entertainment and dance,*" so the invitations read.

Some were scandalized. Really, such a revel was a little premature, with policemen still in the house! But as it was an open secret that a cast of the best New York talent had been engaged, and no expense spared in any direction to make the affair a success, this promised return of the reign of gaiety was generally welcomed.

For one thing, no one felt any longer under suspicion. All evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, a rumor had gone forth that Olga

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Legrand had committed suicide—after killing Estamps in a fit of jealousy. Clara Hope was believed to have been drowned accidentally, and Bollar was expected to leave as soon as the body was finally recovered. The followers of the primrose path admitted that they were selfish. But gloom bored them. Why should they continue to mope? A coroner's inquest would soon wind up everything.

True, Minnie Deyo was said to be critically ill, and a spruce young man, representing himself to be a specialist, had arrived from the city. The Ferret's pleasant-faced friend from the local hospital had also appeared, and not another soul was permitted to set foot inside of Minnie's room. But otherwise, people might come and go as they liked, and few noticed that whenever they went beyond the grounds they were certain to be followed by one or another of a number of incónspicuous strangers who of late were to be seen idling about.

So the night of the *fête* arrived. The theatre, of the "bijou" type, with a horseshoe of boxes for a balcony, filled up to its last inch and became a "jewel" indeed. For the crowd had made the most of a hint that they might wear fancy dress. McClue winced as he caught his first view of the glittering spectacle from one of the proscenium loges, though this unfeeling

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display was all the result of his own wire-pulling.

"Of course it's best to keep everybody amused till the last minute," he said to Bollar who stood at his elbow; "one catches a weasel when he's asleep. All the same, I feel as if I was at a rotten bull-fight in Spain."

"Or a gladitorial contest in ancient Rome," supplemented Lounsbury, entering at that moment with two heavily veiled women, whom he helped to seats in the back of the box.

"Bull-fight or prize-fight—it's all the same to me," snapped the Chief of Police. "I've took your orders, Ferret, like a blind man. After what you told me—golly! I didn't dare not. But it's time you dropped this hocus pocus and come out with the particulars. Me and not you will git the blame if anything goes wrong."

"A little more patience, Chief. Remember, you'll be getting all the credit, too. Have you hidden your men where I suggested?"

"Where you ordered," corrected Bollar. "Everything's ready, and no matter which way our birds make a move they'll be stickin' their wrists into bracelets."

"To make it absolutely fair," explained the Ferret, turning towards the ladies, "we have seated every possible suspect alone in one of the boxes. The curtains are drawn in front of

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them, and they are at liberty to keep out of sight as long as they like. Things look easy for a get-away."

"Look, but ain't," interpolated the Chief.

"Exactly. The passage back of the boxes has three exits—one in the center and one at each end. To all appearances it is entirely empty—or will be as soon as the performance begins and people stop moving about. Before the evening is over, those exits are going to look mighty attractive—to one box-holder, at least. And to be caught running at a time like this will be fatal. We hope to provoke a confession. It's simple enough. The idea is merely a variation of the old-time third degree, put on in a novel and *de luxe* style."

A murmur of disappointment ran through the audience as the ushers began to pass the purposely belated programmes. The only item on the bill was "Hamlet." And though a note stated that the object of the selection was "to bring before the members of the Superba Company an artistic rendition in the original Shakespearian manner" of a work which they were even then in the course of "recreating as a silent drama," the prospect did look a little dull and educational.

But the orchestra, beginning its overture in a manner anything but Shakespearian, was a good

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one, and the murmurs ceased. A boy brought McClue a card.

"Joseph M. Carter."

"Show him to the middle box, and tell him please to keep his curtain drawn."

"Who is the distinguished guest?" ventured a feminine voice.

"A gentleman who sometimes signs himself 'Anxious,'" answered McClue. "But keep your veil down, Minnie. You are supposed to be ill."

The orchestra ceased, and McClue rose, stepping to the front of the box.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, in a clear, impersonal voice, "I noticed that some of you seemed disappointed when you learned that the bill tonight was a drama to which you have already given so much of your time. So I wish to advise you in advance of a novelty which is in store. There is in this famous tragedy, as you all know better than I, a play within a play, 'the image of a murder done in Vienna.' Instead of this, which Hamlet, himself, called 'The Mouse Trap,' I believe, and set to catch a guilty king, it has been thought advisable to substitute something of nearer interest."

He sat down amidst a surprised hush, and almost immediately the curtain rose upon "a scene in Elsinore, showing a platform before

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the castle." The familiar ghost stalked. The Prince of Denmark played at madness. It was evident to the dullest that here were artists of the first water that could only have been collected together by an utterly reckless outlay of capital. But the audience merely waited, no longer easy, knowing now that all this was a mere prelude to some vague plan which had ceased to seem to have their pleasure for its object.

As the interval after the second act drew to a close, the party in the proscenium box rearranged themselves according to a pre-conceived plan. The actors upon the stage assembled in that mimic hall at Elsinore where, in the original, the "Mouse Trap" is played. Came the second scene in act three. But in place of the usual setting, the cast sat staring at a large blank square on the back-drop, perfectly white and empty.

The lights in the theatre had gone entirely out, and now the lights on the stage began to wane. The place became like a cavern, black, illimitable, echoing with the nervous shuffling of feet. Again the voice of McClue arose:

"We have been told tonight that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy. This is true. For instance, we have grown accustomed to

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think that it is impossible to see what takes place in the dark. So thought Claudius in the garden of Hamlet's father. So thought the murderer of Jean Estamps. It was very dark that night—do you remember? A storm was gathering. The criminal must have supposed himself safe from everything but the eye of God.

“Yet there was another eye which saw him—the eye of science, a simple lens made from a crystal of quartz. And long before the panchroma arcs drew us to the spot, the fatal room in the tower was filled with rays from a mercury-vapor lamp coated over with a film of silver. To ordinary sight, those rays were dark. But what they revealed to the eye of quartz you will now be shown. We owe the record to Olga Légrand, who met her death while trying to preserve it.”

Probably not half a dozen persons in the audience had been able to follow this discourse. The one fact vaguely grasped was that in some manner a way had been found to take pictures in the dark. But even as he ceased speaking the figure of the murdered Estamps grew distinct upon the screen. An instant later, a white spot-light from somewhere near the ceiling reached out its long, ghostly finger and touched the face of one of the women in the proscenium

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box, who had moved forward and lifted her veil. It was Clara Hope.

The effect was like that of the explosion of two bombs, one after the other. Cries of semi-panic arose, and quiet was only restored when the spot-light was cut off. Then all eyes returned to the screen, and were held there by the apparition of Darehurst. The action was the same as that which had been witnessed by the three original spectators in the library. But a strange alteration had taken place in the film. Instead of growing more shadowy it grew more clear. And when the figures of the women appeared their faces were covered with long white veils.

CHAPTER XVII

UNMASKED

PHILIPPA BELL, sitting solitary and invisible behind the curtains of her box, was as surprised as anybody by the discovery that the murder of Estamps had been filmed. She had sensed for several days that McClue was preparing a plot, but had expected no such melodramatic thing as this.

She had believed him to be her friend—especially since he had entrusted her with the secret of Clara's safety and the reason for Minnie's feigned indisposition. But as she turned her eyes to the screen and saw the drama of the shadows actually begin, she shuddered. Really, anything as bad as this it would have been impossible to imagine.

A man entered the box and touched her on the shoulder, causing her to start like a criminal upon whom the hand of the law has been suddenly laid. But it was not an officer—it was a figure she had known, though but slightly, before ever officers entered actively into her life.

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"Mr. Solovief!" she exclaimed. "I didn't know you were in town."

"Sorry I frightened you," replied the man with the beard and the heavy-rimmed glasses, speaking in a deep guttural voice. "But my business is urgent. Mr. Darehurst wants to see you at once, and didn't think it wise to show himself."

"Where is he?" asked Philippa, rising.

"I will take you to him. Try to act as though nothing had happened. If we are stopped, remember we are merely taking a promenade. Say you felt faint, or something. But let us hurry."

She accepted his offered arm, and they sauntered out into the passage, assuming as best they could an air of indifference and unconcern. As they came to a door giving access to other parts of the house, a man in citizen's clothes but obviously a policeman stepped from behind a potted palm, scrutinized them closely, and allowed them to pass. Clearly they were not named on any list of persons with whom he had orders to interfere.

"This way!" whispered Solovief, hurrying along a dimly-lighted and branching hall and up a flight of steep and narrow stairs. "We are safe enough now. Darehurst is in one of the unused dressing-rooms. I have a key."

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He stooped and unlocked a door, shoved the woman forward, and locked the door behind him. It was, as he had said, an unused dressing-room—unused and abandoned for a long time, apparently, for the couch, table and two chairs which constituted its sole furniture looked shabby and dusty even in the faint light of a single electric bulb; and the rug which once had covered the floor was rolled up and thrown to one side. Philippa looked quickly around. The room was tenantless. This was the one startling fact which was borne in upon her mind.

“Mr. Darehurst—where is he?” she demanded, wheeling to face her companion.

“Presently! Presently!” he answered, in a less guttural voice than before.

And then he stepped to the table and removed his glasses, a wig, and a set of false whiskers.

“You!” gasped Philippa, as he turned. “You!”

She could articulate nothing further, and the man, slowly approaching her, made a deprecatory gesture.

“I, Philippa; I. If I hadn’t slipped on a disguise, which I fortunately had in my pockets, they would never have let me leave the box.”

“Then it has been you all the time that we thought was Mr. Solovief.”

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"Quite right. I am afraid Mr. Solovief has no separate existence. He has been convenient, and may be convenient again, though it looks as if his usefulness was becoming doubtful. But I didn't bring you here to talk about him."

"Don't come near me—don't touch me! I believe you committed the murder."

"You didn't see any Solovief on the film, Philippa."

"No; you brought me away. But the others will see you."

"That is mere guess-work," said the man. "You don't believe it. Darehurst killed Jean Estamps, as nobody knows better than you. It wasn't merely a film then—you saw him with your own eyes."

"Yes, I saw him," murmured Philippa. "But—horrible as that brute's pursuit of me was—I don't believe Alex did it. If he would only confide in me, everything would be explained. But he saw me, too, and pretends to think—oh! Why can't he listen to reason?"

"Reason enough," said the other. "He is guilty. And McClue knows it and is setting about to prove it. That picture—"

"How can a picture prove anything? Do you believe it was actually taken by invisible light?"

"I believe there was such a picture taken. The camera in the card-room certainly com-

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manded the top of the stairs. And one of the panchroma globes was silvered over, too. I've noticed it, but thought it was only one of Lounsbury's fool experiments. I never realized what it could mean—till afterwards. Of course a picture alone would never convince a jury—a film is too easily faked. But McClue knows too much. Even Bollar has a thing or two up his sleeve. He found the uniform which Darehurst tried to escape in—you see, even I am wise to that. It was hidden in the bushes. They'll certainly manage a conviction between them if something isn't done."

"What are you planning?" demanded Philippa, drawing back.

"A get-away, of course. Nearly everybody is in the theatre, now. The fools didn't think it necessary to stop you, and forgot to give orders to stop me. It never occurred to them that Solovief was a man who could leave without arriving. I have bribed two of the policemen outside, and there's an automobile waiting beyond the gate. We can make it if we start at once. The only way to save Darehurst is to run before they can compel us to testify against him. Let's be generous, and draw the guilt down upon our own heads for a while."

"No; this is some trick. I begin to see—yes, yes! You were there. You were there. You

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must have been or you wouldn't know so much. And somehow you did it. Alex—it couldn't have been he. And if it was, he'll never let me bear the guilt."

"Let him roast in his own fat, then."

The man caught the woman by the arm, a fire that had been half-hidden in his eyes blazing into a sudden, baleful light. But she jerked away from him.

"No! I am beginning to see—oh, ever so many things. You are not a man, but a devil."

"Have it your own way; you're one of my kind. And you've known for a long time that I love you."

"Love? I despise you!" panted Philippa, robbed suddenly of that sense of personal inviolability which until now had followed her through life. "Let me out of this place. I am going to tell McClue the whole truth—everything I saw. What a fool I was ever to doubt Alex. The truth will save him. What seemed to be the truth must have been only some trickery of yours. Let me go!"

"Hardly!" said the man. "The truth might not be so healthy for *me*. Besides, do you think I'm going to give you up? You don't know me. If I can't get what I want by fair means, I try foul. Once more, will you let me take you away?"

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"No!"

The word was flung in his face like a whip-lash; he sprang towards her.

"Scream if you want to," he taunted. "Nobody can hear."

Philippa fought with all her strength. She begged him to save himself; warned him that he would surely be taken if he did not go. But she was in the grasp of one who to all intents and purposes had gone mad. Utter incredulity almost benumbed her senses. Monstrous possibilities that tried to encompass her—they could not be real. This encounter, the horrible isolation of that upper room—it must be a nightmare. But she could not break free. Step by step she was forced across the floor.

McClue, as the play within the play continued, became more and more anxious for the success of his scheme. Minute after minute slipped by, and still no report came from Bollar's aids of any attempt at escape. He had cut certain portions of the original film and put in scenes which had been enacted secretly by artists made up for their parts—chiefly with the idea of protecting Philippa from public clamor. Those veiled women he had put on must indicate clearly enough to the guilty that he had knowledge which he was holding back. He had hoped to create the impression that his knowledge was

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unlimited—to weave a net and to frighten his quarry into it. But the curtained boxes mocked him with a sullen threat of failure. The whole performance began to look like a fizzle.

It was far from being a fizzle, however, to the spectators in the main body of the theatre. An ugly growl had come from the seats the minute the bearded man was recognized, and after the depiction of the revolver-shot the growl became a roar.

“Solovief!”

“The dirty Russian! Where is he?”

“Let’s hang him.”

The tumult subsided after a time, checked by curiosity over the first female figure and its veil, but it broke out again as Solovief was revealed in the act of losing his disguise.

“Who is he?”

“Show him to us!”

The shouting became insistent and threatening—for McClue had used the genuine film here and hidden its weakness by blotting the man’s face entirely out with paint.

“Who is he?” asked Clara in the detective’s ear, with difficulty making herself heard. “I am strong again now. I *must* know. Isn’t it that dreadful Chinaman—or the one you call ‘Chicago Mike’?”

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"Where is Lonny?" broke in Minnie. "My! I wish they wouldn't shout so."

"This is horrible!" exclaimed McClue, jumping to his feet. "You two must get out of this. There is going to be a riot."

He almost thrust the two girls out of the box and into the passageway, where the general pandemonium was less in evidence. Yet even here the rising tide of mob fury smote the ear with the threat of disaster. Then suddenly all was quiet.

"Keep her back, Minnie—by force if necessary. There may be shooting in another minute. But I must find out what is happening."

McClue returned to the box just in time to see a woman, who had made her way from the audience to the stage, stilling the last murmurs of disturbance with an imperative wave of her arm. It was Mrs. Childs.

"Listen!" the housekeeper's voice rang out. "It's all a lie—that picture. That's no picture of the murder. I know. I was there. And do you suppose I was wearing a veil? No! It's a fake—something acted with make-ups. Did you see the beard torn off of Solovief? And yet they wouldn't let you see his face. Why didn't they have somebody make up for the face, too? They didn't dare. They don't know."

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They are guessing. They think, by making believe that they know how it all happened, that you'll take their word for it when they are ready to say who is guilty. They are guessing, I tell you, and guessing wrong. Solovief didn't shoot Estamps. No man did. I shot him, myself!"

A low murmur of incredulous voices followed her declaration, and cries of—"No, no! We can't believe that."

Mrs. Childs stood still, dumbfounded by her failure.

"Do you think I would lie?" she protested. But all conviction had gone from her voice.

"We know you didn't do it!"

A tough looking young rowdy, who bore every appearance of having no right to be present in such an assembly, had leaped upon his seat. He was one of those leather-lunged individuals who are like a charge of dynamite in any crowd.

"It was Darehurst. He done the shootin'. Everybody knows that. And somebody's tryin' to railroad Whiskers to the chair in his place. You must have a soft spot for Whiskers, old lady. It's turned your noodle. But who's pullin' this fake movie? That's what we want to know."

The answer came from another obvious outsider—one with a voice like a trumpet:

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"Ferret McClue!"

"Too many New York detectives—that's right."

"How about a little tar and feathers?"

"He better not show his head again here."

McClue, who was standing in the back of the box, began to see that there was something more than blind stupidity behind this demonstration. He had permitted a miscellaneous gathering so as to give an air of good faith to the entertainment, and evidently somebody had taken advantage of the opportunity to pack the hall. Such determinedly ugly hooligans were not there as the result of accident. Nevertheless, this talk of tar and feathers was not to be borne. He lost his temper and stepped forward into view.

A more imprudent move could not have been made, for the box was accessible from the stage, as the stage was from the audience, and at once there was a rush to drag him down. When several roughs had actually climbed the distance and had to be dealt with by force it was clear that here was no mere row, but a desperate fight.

Yet it was hardly under way before a laugh rang out—a laugh so contemptuous and stinging that it made itself heard above the uproar just as the quiet snarl of a reed instrument will make

UNMASKED

itself heard above the roll of drums in an orchestra. Attention was turned towards a box in the middle of the horseshoe, where, with the curtains thrown back, now stood Mr. Joseph M. Carter, otherwise known as "Anxious."

"You are not acquainted with me, I believe," he began, his voice dominating all other sounds. "But I know your kind without any introduction. I am the owner of Ivy Towers. Mr. McClue is here at my invitation and is acting with my approval. Especially he has my approval for the scientific manner in which he landed a blow on the jaw of the last rowdy who reached his box. But instead of trying to molest *him*, which seems to be difficult, supposing you deal directly with me. What is it you want? Would you like to have me come down?"

"We want the truth!" someone shouted.

"Anxious" laughed again.

"Oh, no you don't! You want a chance to break something. Really, you're not worth talking to."

He talked, nevertheless, delivering a string of choice invective which could only have been gathered together from the four quarters of the earth. Yet there was a courtliness about this swarthy stranger. Even his denunciations had a well-bred air.

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"Mr. McClue has important things to think about," he concluded. "He can't be bothered with a house full of mattoids and a sprinkling of roughnecks. Take your seats and give your attention to the stage—unless you want to tar and feather Mr. Shakespeare."

There was a burst of good-natured laughter. The mob, swayed as easily by a good leader as by a bad, sank back to its seats. And as the film had by this time reached its end, the flesh-and-blood players picked up their interrupted parts, and "Hamlet" went on.

"What was going on out there?" asked Minnie, as McClue returned. "I could hardly hold Clara back."

"Just a speech from a dandy old party who came to my rescue. I'll tell you about it later. Well, Chief, how goes it? Everything all right?"

"I'm afraid it ain't, Mac," said Bollar, hurrying up. "I was coming out to help you, when—but first of all, you see, we caught Darehurst."

"Darehurst?"

"Yes—just as he was trying to escape. He was one of those to be watched, you know, and I thought we'd got our man. But his story didn't square with the facts any better than before."

UNMASKED

"Of course. He was afraid for Philippa, and was keeping you busy to give her time to—"

"I guess that was it, for while I was busy with him, out Philippa went."

"No matter; she probably went to her room. It was on the programme not to interfere with her."

"Yes, but she wasn't alone. My man reports that Solovief was with her—yes, Solovief! Knowin' that he was another man, I never thought to give orders to stop him in his disguise."

"My God! Neither did I. Who had any idea that he'd ever dare—but where are they now? We must hurry—"

"I don't know. They're gone. You might as well take charge of this case, Mac—without my help. I'm—I'm all in."

"Oh, yes—take charge of it *now*! But show me the man who let them pass—and be quick about it."

The man referred to was still at his station near the end of the passage, and pointed out the direction which the missing ones had taken, declaring positively that he had heard them start for the floor above.

"Then they may be still in the building. Alone with Philippa—and he half mad by this time. I *must* find her. Why doesn't she

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scream? They can't have gone far—in this direction. Why don't we hear her?"

McClue was rushing through the intricate passages above the auditorium as he poured out these almost incoherent complaints, opening doors that would open, and with Bollar's aid bursting in those that would not. Finally a cry, breaking out abruptly but quickly stifled, caught his ear. Once more a door went to smash—and there stood Philippa Bell, her dress torn, her hair in disorder, alone in an empty room.

"Where is Solovief?"

It was Bollar's question. Philippa tottered to the couch and sank down like a person in a daze.

"Solovief? There is no Solovief."

"We know," McClue quietly put in. "Here is his disguise on the table. What we mean is—where is *Farlow*?"

Philippa shook her head. Then suddenly she extended an arm towards the open window.

"This is the top story," she muttered wildly. "You were just in time. He heard you coming, and—the paved court below. Look there."

CHAPTER XVIII

STRANGER THAN FICTION

WHEN McClue finally reached Philippa's apartment it was after midnight. He was accompanied by Lounsbury, "Anxious," the Chief of Police and two men in handcuffs.

"If it is not too late—" he began.

Rosalie, who had answered the door, interrupted with a helpless gesture.

"My mistress can't sleep. Miss Hope and Miss Deyo are with her. They are waiting for you."

"Then call Mrs. Childs, please. We'd better get things straightened out at once."

The visitors were conducted to a sitting-room, "Anxious" keeping in the background and seating himself eventually behind a screen near Bollar and the prisoners.

"Farlow is dead," announced the Ferret, approaching Philippa where she lay tossing and moaning on a sofa.

"Coffee! My cup of coffee—why doesn't it

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come? Why are you all trying to keep it away from me?"

"Are they really trying? That's wrong. This once I think you'd better have it. Perhaps—here it is now."

McClue stepped quickly across the room and took a tray from the hands of an entering servant.

"It's such a strange comfort, sometimes," said Philippa, as she sipped the hot beverage which the detective had gallantly poured and placed before her. "Rosalie is funny. She doesn't want me to have it lately—says it keeps me awake. It doesn't. More often it keeps me from going to pieces. And now—tell me everything, won't you?"

"It's all over." The Ferret began to pace up and down the room—a habit of his when summing up a case. "Farlow lived long enough to confess that he killed Estamps, mistaking him for Darehurst. Which reminds me—Darehurst ought to be here."

"He is," said Darehurst, himself, having entered a moment before in company with an officer.

"You Don Quixote!" smiled McClue. "You ought to be kept under lock and key for a month. Now I can begin. And I think I'd better tell

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the story so that even those outside of the events can understand it.

“The cause of things runs back to San Francisco, some years ago, where a man named Coles kept a drug store, with Farlow for a partner. In the same city was a young lady with a determination to go on the stage, in spite of her family—which was rich. There was also a young man, who had entered an eastern university but failed to graduate. He had just been admitted to the California bar, but had not yet made much of a success in life. In fact, after a youthful prank, which needn’t concern us, had interrupted his college career, he had tried cow-punching. I really wonder why he failed at that. Neither the report of my operator out West nor the few words let fall by Farlow before he died throw any light upon the subject. I see how he would fail in the law. But cow-punching—!”

“On one of my visits to San Francisco I saw the young lady you mention—saw her on the street and followed her till I found out where she lived,” put in Darehurst simply. “I wanted to establish myself where I could make her acquaintance. And as I’d studied law in college, that seemed the simplest way.”

“It was as romantic as all that?”

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"Yes; and the young lady was I," said Philippa, who seemed rapidly recovering her spirits. "There is no use making any further mystery about it."

"Very well," continued the narrator, "the young lady was you; this unsuccessful lawyer succeeded in making your acquaintance, and you proceeded to interest him in an amateur theatrical troupe which met at your home. One night Coles, alone in the drug store, was struck down by a burglar. Coles died, after recovering consciousness for but a few moments, and his heirs called in Darehurst to settle the estate. And the next thing we hear, Farlow, the surviving partner, is going out of the drug business, organizing a motion-picture company, and inviting the unsuccessful lawyer and the stage-struck young lady to become members."

"He didn't *invite* me," volunteered Darehurst. "I asked him for a place as soon as I learned that Philippa was going to join. I put up a rather stiff bluff, but was surprised when he accepted me—at a fat salary."

"You owed that," said McClue, "to the fact that Coles was known to have recovered consciousness before dying. Farlow would have given you a half interest if you had demanded it."

"I don't understand."

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"And it never occurred to you to wonder where Farlow got all his money? The drug store had never amounted to much. In fact, about all their trade was in photographer's supplies."

"Farlow told me he had been left a little legacy," said Darehurst.

"But you didn't think it necessary to verify his statement," affirmed the Ferret. "Certainly you were never cut out for the law. Farlow got his money from the drug store safe. *He* was the burglar who murdered Coles. He confessed it to me. And Coles had just completed a successful speculation outside of his regular business. Farlow got quite a neat bunch of negotiable securities—but no such sum as to account for his expenditures after he brought his company east and reorganized it as the Superba."

"No, he had a good deal of money from Philippa afterwards," Darehurst explained. "She helped him finance the concern—or so I always understood. But you haven't explained why Farlow was so good to me."

"You are right about the financing—in part, though if you young people realized how much money you have been spending here you would see that Farlow must of late had yet other resources. And the reason he was good to you,

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as you term it, was because he thought that Coles had made a dying statement. Farlow took you for a blackmailer—and a very poor one. He wondered why you were so easy with him, until finally he came to the conclusion that you were meditating some *coup*—waiting till he was sufficiently rich, or something like that. He even got it into his head that Cole's statement was in writing. You clinched matters by having a wall-safe put into your room. Then he was certain, and hired Chicago Mike—the gentleman over there in the corner—to come and open it for him. It was the night that Estamps was killed."

"Right you are, boss," spoke up one of the manacled figures. "He hands me some coin and fixes it for me to slip in here and crack the crib. But they wan't nothin' in the safe, and somethin' went wrong. So I beat it."

"You were late—that's what went wrong. He was in the card-room at eleven o'clock as agreed between you, waiting for your signal from outside that all was accomplished. When it didn't come he got nervous and decided on another plan."

"Anyway, they was too much moochin' up and down the halls—and it was me for the lightnin'-rod. But if I didn't know you was a sport, Ferret, I'd never spill the beans the way I'm

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doin' after you has me pinched and the nippers on me."

"That's because you gave me the slip, Mike. But I suppose it was a temptation when you got word that a Russian gentleman would get you out of the hospital. Perhaps you've been punished enough. Take off the handcuffs, Chief. He's telling the truth."

"A dying statement!" mused Darehurst aloud, while Bollar rather reluctantly complied with instructions. "The only dying statement Coles ever made to me was that he hadn't recognized who struck him at all. And the safe—I had it put in to keep some letters. I'd begun to suspect that my desk was being tampered with. They were love letters, if you want to know, and circumstances made it important—"

"They were ours," interrupted Philippa, "written on one or two occasions when I was away visiting relatives. Things got so that we lost confidence even in the wall-safe and hired a safe-deposit box down town. That's why nothing was found. We suspected that either Olga, or else somebody who doesn't appear in this case at all—but I'll explain later. Please go on."

"There isn't much more to tell," McClue responded, "though I forewarn you that your

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somebody *does* appear. This is one of my failures, I am afraid. I didn't realize that Farlow would have the audacity to wear his Russian disguise after what happened the night of Olga Legrand's party, so I failed to give sufficiently comprehensive orders for his arrest. The result was nearly disastrous. But I may say this for myself—it was Farlow's name which I put in a short summary of the evidence that I sent to my office when I found my own life threatened."

"Who threatened you, Mac?" asked the Chief of Police, his interest overcoming his official dignity, already pretty much in tatters. "And how did you come to fix on *him*?"

"I owe that to Miss Hope," answered the Ferret, ignoring the first question. "Two scenes that she witnessed immediately after her arrival made it clear that Darehurst had an open enemy in Estamps, and in Farlow a pretended friend whose anxiety to get the star to do without an understudy for the dangerous parts was cleverly cloaked under an appearance of professional zeal for the success of the pictures. When I saw how much like Darehurst, Estamps looked, even dead, it was easy to guess that the intended victim had been Darehurst, himself.

"Solovief fooled me for a while. It seemed

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hard to believe that Farlow could pass himself off as a Russian among his own company. But he kept aloof, was never supposed to have any business except with Farlow, and the two were never visible at the same time. Farlow must have created the character to enable him to murder Darehurst with impunity in case all other plans failed and should Cole's imagined statement remain unfound. The fellow's guilt became rather obvious—especially after I had a run in with Yen Hui, and learned how Farlow had told him that I poisoned his dog. Of course the dog was really poisoned for the accommodation of Chicago Mike, who has a constitutional dislike of these vigilant animals. Any other questions?"

"I don't understand why I didn't see Farlow—in his Russian make-up—until after I got to the island that night I followed Olga," said Clara Hope.

"You weren't looking for him, and it was pretty dark. He must have set out in *The Spotlight* while you were following Olga's course as she battled with the current. You walked along the beach, you tell me, so your back was turned to the boat-house. When you went back for a boat, *The Ophelia* was the only one left, and he was quite out of sight by the time you had it loose from its chain. The boat you

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found in mid-channel was Olga's boat—*The Philippa*. She had reached the island in it, met Farlow, and wounded him in her final struggle. He probably had noticed that one of the globes in the tower-room was different from the others, and knew enough of photography to guess the truth when guilt had awakened his suspicion of everything about him. My idea is that he didn't mean to kill Olga, but simply to force her to tell where she had hidden the film. But finding her dead, he threw her body into the water.

"*The Philippa* drifted off during the struggle. By the time you arrived with it, after abandoning your own boat, he must have started away in *The Spotlight*, as you found the island vacant. But he saw you or heard you calling, and returned. You had let *The Philippa* slip, and were stranded. He overpowered you without giving you a chance to use your pistol, and brought you back in *The Spotlight*. That explains the mystery of the boats.

"But *The Spotlight* was now stained with blood. Olga had given him only a slight cut in the hand, but it threatened his very life, never-the-less. His habit of wearing gloves helped him to hide it afterwards, but he was too hurried in his cleaning of the boat. He made another mistake in not breaking the chain or drawing the staple. It was as plain as pike-

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staff the next morning that whoever had taken *The Spotlight* knew where to find the key. But of course he didn't know that traces of blood would be found both on the stern seat and on the island, and lead at least to a strong presumption that the boat had been out.

"His leaving you bound and gagged in the ash-bin was an act of pure desperation. Not being able to bring himself to kill you outright, he felt compelled to leave you there to die.

"Putting the ladder against the balcony and then drawing it in on the night of the Estamps murder was a more puzzling move. I never did find the ladder, the dagger, the revolver, or the gloves which were scratched on the sword hilt. No doubt the Sound and the kitchen range took care of them. But he thought of putting up the ladder as evidence of a robbery too late to tell Mike about it, so Mike broke his leg. Then, when Farlow found himself unexpectedly the slayer of Estamps, he decided to remove all possible traces of an outside visit and to let Darehurst bear the blame. He remembered the ladder, but forgot the cellar window; and Mike, with his broken leg, forgot to remove the grapple from the tree where he climbed the wall.

"Another dreadful mistake was substituting the clock in Darehurst's room for the one show-

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ing that a shot had been fired. Of course I hadn't advertised the fact that I had already found the bullet. But I don't see how Farlow could have been quite so foolish as to assume that I hadn't, especially when there was the hole and no bullet in it. Practically it was presenting me with the information that the murderer was still among us. And Mrs. Childs, housekeeper though she is, denied all knowledge of any duplicate clock. I don't understand that either. By the way, where is Mrs. Childs?"

"I am here," said a choked voice at the farther end of the room among the shadows. "I didn't tell you about the clock because I am the one who changed it. I saw the bullet-hole the next morning. I didn't know the bullet was gone."

"You, Mrs. Childs? But why? Why did you do it? Your part in all this is beyond me."

"Of course it is, Mr. McClue. I am an ugly old woman. It is inconceivable that I should have a mad passion for a man, just as if I was young and beautiful. But Matthew Farlow always had his way with me, and I mourn him now that he is dead. I am the only one, I guess—unless it's the Chinaman. I didn't know Matt was Solovief,—not until that night. But it wouldn't have made any difference. Why, I tried to kill you just because I heard you—that

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time you were in the ash-pit—looking for things. It was I who rolled the lump of coal into the mouth of one of the ash-chutes. I must have been mad, I suppose. Somehow he—he robbed me of my will.”

“So, it was really you—in the film?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t believe it,” Philippa protested.

“Naturally you can’t, child, for you have always been good. But I—though I used to be your nurse—I let you stay here in this viper’s nest without once warning you of what was going on. Matthew Farlow was my husband—at least so I used to think. Then I found he already had a wife living when he met me. But I couldn’t turn against him. And now I am dying, too, before my time—a prematurely old woman. I have a cancer, the doctors say. Don’t look at me so, all of you. Pity me! I am already worse than dead.”

A shudder went through the company as the wretched housekeeper, hiding her face in her apron, was permitted to withdraw. It was Philippa who finally broke the silence.

“Mrs. Childs omitted one thing, but perhaps you know it. About two years ago Mr. Farlow began using drugs. I only found it out later, but I, too, have a confession to make. I, myself, am an addict.”

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“What!”

It was “Anxious” who cried out, but McClue inexorably waved him back.

“Who was that?” asked Philippa in a startled voice, looking about.

“Anxious,” however, had hidden himself again, and—seeing only the everyday faces—the woman finally continued:

“Yes, I am an addict. This I discovered very recently. But for some time I have known that I could not get along without certain tablets that at first I took for headache and sleeplessness. I used to keep them in my powder-box, for I was ashamed to have it known that I continually needed medicine. Farlow got it for me, and tonight he told me that it contained salts of morphia. He thought that I would become like him—that he could do what he liked with me. He boasted of it tonight. I have tried to stop, but I can’t. Mrs. Childs is not the only one who is worse than dead.”

“The devil! The inhuman devil!”

Darehurst sprang from his chair and stood impotently opening and closing his hands, baffled by the absence of any object upon which he could vent his rage.

“But it isn’t true, dear—it can’t be,” he went on, dropping to his knees beside the couch and taking Philippa’s hands.

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"Yes, I am afraid it—"

"Of course it isn't true," interposed McClue. "I know something of drugs. You are young and strong yet. With a physician's care and a little nursing you'll soon be able to free yourself of the habit. The reason you haven't succeeded before is because Farlow was having your coffee drugged—by that miserable Chinaman you see over there by the Chief, hiding his handcuffs in the sleeves of his blouse. I drugged it tonight myself, because you've had a shock, and it was no time to begin doing without the dose you are accustomed to. But from tomorrow, if you will try—"

"Will I try? You've given me something to live for. And yet—"

Suddenly she turned her eyes full upon Darehurst.

"Alex, when I saw you there in the tower room with Estamps, I never saw Farlow—or Solovief. I couldn't help suspecting you. Can you forgive me?"

"And when I saw you," said Darehurst, "I thought—"

"You really suspected me?" Philippa interrupted. "That day in the pergola—I thought you were only pretending to. It was the hardest thing I have had to bear."

"It's all right, dearest." Darehurst sat

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down beside her and frankly put his arm about her waist. "It seems that neither of us is like that camera of Lounsbury's. We only half see in the dark.

"I want you to know the truth," he went on, turning to the company. "Philippa is my wife. We were married nearly two years ago, but kept it secret because her father objected to me. That was our first mistake—keeping it a secret."

"Oh! Oh! How good! I knew—oh, I understand everything now!" cried Minnie, quite beside herself and clapping her hands.

"You were worse than the Ferret, Minnie," Philippa smiled, drawing the girl towards her.

Minnie stooped, hesitated, and boldly whispered in Philippa's ear.

Philippa turned scarlet, then nodded and hid her head on her husband's shoulder.

"It isn't true that my father objected particularly to Mr. Darehurst," she explained, without changing her position. "He objected to any man who wanted to marry me. And yet he is a wonderful father—I can't remember my mother—and no daughter could help loving him. I've always been a very foolish girl—romantic, stage-struck, and all that. So finally he let me go into the movies, take my mother's maiden

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name, and come East—hoping that I would get sick of it, perhaps. And though he did trust Mrs. Childs, none of these horrors would have happened—only he is in South America, where he can't—”

“Permit me,” interrupted McClue, seeing that “Anxious” could no longer be restrained; “permit me to introduce Mr. Joseph M. Carter, who has fortunately returned from South America rather earlier than was expected.”

“Father!” cried Philippa, leaping up.

“I have been a selfish brute,” said Carter, alias “Anxious,” embracing his daughter. “It was criminal of me not to want you to marry. But you were all I had left of your mother, and I couldn't bear to see anyone take you away from me. It's lucky I took this trip, for off there alone in the jungle I began to get the truth in its proper light.”

“Is he *the* Joseph M. Carter?” whispered Clara.

“Yes,” rejoined McClue; “the millionaire explorer. Mrs. Childs, in response to one of Farlow's plans for getting rid of Darehurst, cabled him some alarming misinformation—not knowing that Philippa was married. Carter at once ordered his lawyers to get me to investigate, hoping to receive a report by wire on his way

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home. He has been well punished for a certain type of jealousy which is much more common than is generally supposed. Look! He is shaking hands with his son-in-law. *La comédie est finie.*"

CHAPTER XIX

CHRISTIE JOHNSON

CLARA began her breakfast alone the next morning. It was to be her last day at Ivy Towers, and she wore—much against her will—"the flimsiest and feministiest thing" which Minnie and Rosalie, working together like conspirators, could find in the house.

"There's a reason!" the little mouse had declared when the ex-school-mistress protested. "You think the play is over. But there's another act yet, and you've got to dress for your part. Philippa Bell—Mrs. Darehurst, I mean—says so."

This was upstairs. And now, being late and having the veranda all to herself, Clara saw less reason than ever for the finery—and for the suppressed excitement which she had detected in Minnie's eyes. But Minnie, herself, soon reappeared, gay and laughing—as if joy in existence were a matter of course with everybody.

"Bollar is in form again!" she cried. "He's going around telling everybody that he practically solved the whole mystery because he was the first to discover marks on what he calls

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Philippa's 'wedding-ring finger.' Isn't the Chief killing? McClue rather bungled the case, too, don't you think? Without you he'd have made a poor showing."

"On the contrary," contradicted Clara, "I think he discovered nearly everything."

"You do?" Minnie's eyes danced mockingly. "Why, he hasn't been able even to tell us who dropped the things on the stairs."

"Those were trifles," Clara insisted in all seriousness. "And he told me about them last night. Farlow dropped them—the snuff-box accidentally, the other things intentionally—the dollar on the stairs, the ring on the floor below. He wanted to draw Darehurst to where Estamps was, and didn't dare let himself be chased directly to the spot. So he made a quiet detour to the floor above, and then made a noise by throwing the things about. He had already stolen Philippa's diamond to give a natural air to Chicago Mike's supposed robbery."

"So—you had a private confab with McClue last night, and talked about such things as that!" Minnie laughed again. "Now, I talked with him this morning, but it was about matters of importance. For instance, I told him that it was Peter who gave the alarm by turning on the lights. He'd actually forgotten that point. And his idea that Philippa was referring to the

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possible discovery of their marriage when she said to Darehurst that the situation was growing dangerous—it's only a theory even yet."

"It sounds like a good one," Clara put in. "Anyway, he can get the truth now if he thinks it worth while, though I don't see—"

"Good *theory* enough. And of course he did discover some real facts. He noticed, for one thing, that the eyes of some of the company were contracted, and deduced that there were opium fiends here even before he caught Yen Hui and made him confess that he was responsible for the first introduction of the stuff into the Towers. All the same I've come to the conclusion that he's a poor detective,—and you're about as bad."

"What's that?" McClue, coming to take his place at the table, had caught the last few words. "You think I am a poor detective, eh?"

"But I've taken it back that you are any worse than Clara Hope," Minnie retorted, unabashed—though the Ferret, for his part, looked strangely like an amateur actor suffering from his first attack of stage-fright. "Clara really is the worst ever. She couldn't so much as find out why Philippa called her Christie Johnson."

"That's so, she didn't," McClue assented. "I think it was very dull of her, myself."

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Clara laid down her knife and fork.

"You simply have got to tell me about it here and now, or I won't be able to eat another mouthful!"

"It's this way," said Minnie. "Philippa has written a very beautiful play—Mr. McClue heard about it the first day you came—and has never been able to find a woman to take the leading rôle. Until she saw you she was afraid there wasn't a real Christie Johnson—that's the heroine's name—in the world. She had tried out two, and though they rather looked the part they couldn't act it a bit. But when she made you wear that first fluffy dress, like the one you have on now, she found that you *did* act it, and that the plot worked out in real life just as it did in the play."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Let me tell her," begged the Ferret, turning very red. "You go away and—"

"No, sir; I am going to tell her myself so that there will be no further mistakes about it. You see, Clara, Christie Johnson in the play is a very lovely girl. But she doesn't know it, and goes about in dull clothes and with a serious face, so that nobody else knows it, either. Everyone fancies she is a sort of thinking-machine—a school-teachery sort of person. And

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then one day she is away visiting, and somebody spills something on her horrid old dress, and she has to wear another—a borrowed one—and it happens to be the right kind. Do you understand? And she looks in the mirror, and lo and behold, she is beautiful! with wonderful eyes and a real complexion. And then a man comes in—a stupid creature, like all men, who has known her for years without really seeing her. And he suddenly realizes that he has been in love with her for ever so long without having the sense to realize it. Even yet he isn't wise to the fact that she loves him. And as she hasn't discovered that he loves her, all I can say is that they are both very poor detectives. As I have often thought—but there is Mr. Lounsbury. If you don't mind, I'll leave you."

Minnie flew rather than ran to meet the photographer, and then brought him back to the edge of the porch for a final word.

"Clara, while you were talking with Mr. McClue last night, I was talking with Lonny. I'm going to let you guess what it was about. But being you are a detective I suppose you'll have to have a clue. Lonny, you may—now, remember! A *little* one will do."

Lounsbury apparently did not think that a

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"little" one would do at all. And then the pair hurried away, casting mocking glances over their shoulders at the disconcerted couple they had left behind.

"Minnie is dreadful!" gasped Clara, looking at her plate.

"She is," admitted the Ferret. "And yet—what she says is right. You *are* a bad detective, Clara, if you never saw—"

Clara looked up, a gleam of almost incredulous happiness dawning in her eyes.

"Mac, you don't mean—?"

"I do, though," said the Ferret, changing his seat.

And if he plagiarized Lounsbury then and there, even as to his apparent ideas as to the inadequacy of a little one, he could have defended himself with the plea that Lounsbury, himself, had done nothing original.

"It seems almost wicked to be so happy—after all that has happened here," said Clara, some time later.

"Yes," agreed McClue, with unfeeling heartiness. "And I am very sad, too, about India, Africa, Asia, and the Malay Archipelago. They say there is a lot of trouble in those places."

"I can bear it—in the Malay Archipelago. But if things had turned out badly for Philippa,

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even when I thought you were falling in love with her—”

“When you which?”

“Well, never mind about that. Tell me about the primrose petal. Did Philippa drop it, after all?”

“The petal,” said McClue, relapsing into his professional manner, “was one of those utterly perverse clues which seem all important and yet amount to nothing except for their power of leading one astray. It was probably dropped where it was found by a gust coming in through an open window, and if it hadn’t looked so much like a piece of framed-up evidence I’d certainly have thought Philippa guilty. As it was—”

“As it was,” finished Clara Hope, “everything turned out right.”

But the softness of her glance made it doubtful if she were thinking of the petal at all.

THE END





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